

## The Brave Shall Heed The Call

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](http://archiveofourown.org/works/1118472) at <http://archiveofourown.org/works/1118472>.

Rating:	<a href="#">Explicit</a>
Archive Warning:	<a href="#">Graphic Depictions Of Violence</a> , <a href="#">Major Character Death</a> , <a href="#">Rape/Non-Con</a>
Category:	<a href="#">M/M</a> , <a href="#">F/M</a>
Fandom:	<a href="#">Transformers Animated (2007)</a>
Relationship:	<a href="#">Megatron/Optimus Prime</a> , <a href="#">Ratchet/Strika</a> , <a href="#">unhealthy Sentinel Prime/Optimus Prime</a> , <a href="#">Past Megatron/Terminus</a> , <a href="#">Slipstream/Windblade</a> , <a href="#">Blurr/Longarm Prime   Shockwave</a>
Character:	<a href="#">Megatron</a> , <a href="#">Optimus Prime</a> , <a href="#">Sentinel Prime</a> , <a href="#">Strika (Transformers)</a> , <a href="#">Ratchet (Transformers)</a> , <a href="#">Bumblebee (Transformers)</a> , <a href="#">Bulkhead (Transformers)</a> , <a href="#">Longarm Prime   Shockwave</a> , <a href="#">Arcee (Transformers)</a> , <a href="#">Omega Supreme (Transformers)</a> , <a href="#">Lugnut (Transformers)</a> , <a href="#">Jetfire (Transformers)</a> , <a href="#">Jetstorm (Transformers)</a> , <a href="#">Windblade</a> , <a href="#">Slipstream (Transformers)</a> , <a href="#">Jazz (Transformers)</a> , <a href="#">Pharma (Transformers)</a> , <a href="#">Smokescreen</a> , <a href="#">Lockdown (Transformers)</a> , <a href="#">Terminus (Transformers)</a> , <a href="#">Thundercracker</a> , <a href="#">Skywarp</a>
Additional Tags:	<a href="#">a lot of horrible stuff that AO3 just deleted let's see if they come back</a> , <a href="#">Politics</a> , <a href="#">Torture</a> , <a href="#">Medical Experimentation</a> , <a href="#">Betrayal</a> , <a href="#">Abusive Relationships</a> , <a href="#">Recovery</a> , <a href="#">Imprisonment</a> , <a href="#">Rebellion</a> , <a href="#">Character Death</a> , <a href="#">Spark Bond</a> , <a href="#">Spark Sex</a> , <a href="#">Sticky Sex</a> , <a href="#">Wrongful Imprisonment</a> , <a href="#">Conquest</a> , <a href="#">War</a> , <a href="#">Medical Torture</a> , <a href="#">Dystopia</a> , <a href="#">Murder</a> , <a href="#">Execution</a> , <a href="#">Hacking</a> , <a href="#">Mental Health Issues</a> , <a href="#">Lobotomy</a> , <a href="#">Lack of Medical Ethics</a> , <a href="#">Invasion</a> , <a href="#">Political Parties</a> , <a href="#">Political Asylum</a> , <a href="#">Civil War</a> , <a href="#">Civil Rights Issues</a> , <a href="#">Sexual Coercion</a> , <a href="#">Slut Shaming</a> , <a href="#">Harmful Gender Roles</a> , <a href="#">Psychological Torture</a> , <a href="#">hostages</a> , <a href="#">Psychological Horror</a> , <a href="#">Body Horror</a> , <a href="#">Psychological Trauma</a> , <a href="#">Emotional Manipulation</a> , <a href="#">Emotional Baggage</a> , <a href="#">Emotional/Psychological Abuse</a> , <a href="#">Hurt/Comfort</a> , <a href="#">Rise to Power</a> , <a href="#">Horror</a> , <a href="#">genetic manipulation</a> , <a href="#">Mind Manipulation</a> , <a href="#">shadowplay</a> , <a href="#">Mind Control</a> , <a href="#">Rape Recovery</a> , <a href="#">Aftermath of Torture</a> , <a href="#">Psychological Recovery</a> , <a href="#">Self-Harm</a> , <a href="#">Alternate Pronouns</a> , <a href="#">most of this is sentinel's fault I swear</a>
Stats:	Published: 2014-01-19 Completed: 2015-07-24 Chapters: 80/80 Words: 168616

## The Brave Shall Heed The Call

by [MlleMusketeer](#)

### Summary

Defeated and dragged back to the world he called home in chains, Megatron can do no more than endure. A rescue from Cybertron itself is almost impossible; he is forced to face the possibility that the Decepticon cause is lost, and that he will end his days as an Autobot

experimental subject.

Optimus's hero's welcome is shortlived. Deemed too radical and ousted from the position of Magnus on a technicality, he struggles to keep those he cares about safe from the Council's manipulations and Sentinel Prime's ambition, a struggle that will cost him more than he believed possible.

General Strika contemplates a future without her leader, and finds it bleak. If the General of Destruction is to pull the Decepticon Cause's skidplate out of the scrappile, she's going to have to do a lot of thinking outside the box.

Ratchet learns the true uses to which his research has been put, and begins to wonder if the Decepticons had the right idea. When the extents to which Optimus has been forced come to light, Ratchet makes the decision that might save them all or damn him further.

# Chapter 1

The little glitch told him he didn't deserve deactivation.

He got one thing right, of course; deactivation would have been a kindness. Eternally better than his current existence. Eternally better than the pain and the cold clinical lights and the constant buzz of voices and the professional touch of servos, the humiliating scrutiny of his spark.

Megatron offlines his optics and grits his dentae and, shivering, endures.

This too shall pass.

# Act I

## Act One

We'll still live in silence like sworn threats of violence.  
I long for an end and it's coming 'round the bend.  
If we live through this night and we'll still be all right

--Katzenjammer, [\*A Bar in Amsterdam\*](#)

It took less than a stellar cycle for everything to go to Pit.

Which was about six orns longer than Ratchet had expected, but it didn't do anything to ease the sting of watching Optimus droop in, alone and strangely diminished without the Magnus hammer by his side. He pushed a container of oil toward the younger mech. Optimus ignored it and buried his face in his servos.

"You didn't fail, kid," Ratchet said, because it was the only thing to say. "They pushed you out."

Optimus let out a long, shuddering ventilation.

"Still under a gag order?"

Optimus nodded, very slightly.

"Look, kid," said Ratchet, and leaned forward. "That one restriction they brought up? It's scrap. Complete and utter scrap. They're glitched if they think that particular situation's going to come up again—while it's certainly on the *books* it's sure as Pit not something your average mecha cares about."

Optimus slowly looked up at him, shocked. "How did you—"

"I've got my ways. Don't ask. Think you can bend the rules just enough to tell me how Sentinel wormed his slimy way into your place? If I recall correctly, he's just as unsuitable as you are."

Optimus returned his face to his servos. "Still sealed," he muttered.

"Glitched backwards imbeciles," grumbled Ratchet. "Just because someone's still sealed doesn't mean he hasn't fragged half the planet."

"I was irresponsible," said Optimus. "I shouldn't have—"

Ratchet snorted. "Don't give yourself that slag, kid. You weren't irresponsible, you're not damaged goods—there's no reason you shouldn't go to berth with someone you found attractive."

Optimus muttered something into his servos. Ratchet pretended not to hear it, even though he already knew it.

When it came to Sentinel, Optimus would always blame himself rather than face the truth.

Ratchet reset his vocalizer. "So. What did the council of aft-headed glitchmice decide?"

“I am demoted back to the rank of Prime and placed on indefinite leave,” said Optimus into his servos. “The official announcement—and my official resignation speech and apology—airs tomorrow.”

“Apology?” said Ratchet. “They had the neural net to demand an *apology*?”

“For deceiving the people of Cybertron into believing me a suitable candidate for the position of Magnus,” said Optimus. He still hadn’t looked up. “They’ve told me it’ll be best if I vanish from the public optic for a while. If I’m very lucky, I might get a command again.”

“Frag,” said Ratchet. Optimus didn’t move.

Ratchet drew a rough intake. “Well. You’re welcome here, kid. We’ll make sure you don’t get too much trouble from the newsbots in the meantime.”

“Sentinel’s messaged me,” said Optimus very quietly. “Three times. I haven’t dared open them.”

“Don’t, and go to berth,” said Ratchet.

Optimus didn’t. “And one...one that says Megatron wants to talk to me.”

“Frag,” said Ratchet, again.

“His request was approved. By someone high up. It would have to be. I have to agree to it.”

Ratchet wanted to bury his face in his servos. Last thing the kid needed. “How soon?”

“Tomorrow.”

“I’ll come with you. It’ll help to have company, trust me.”

Optimus managed a weak smile. “Thank you.”

## Chapter 3

Morning came far too soon.

Optimus online early, far earlier than he had wanted to, and went in search of fuel. He drank, staring muzzily out the window. Ratchet lived close to the spaceport and the hangars where the shuttles had lived during the war; Optimus could see Omega's from here, and ex-vented heavily, leaning his forehelm against the transparent aluminum.

Earth had been deeply unpleasant when he first arrived there, a strange stinking place. They hadn't known any of the rules, and it always seemed they were doing *something* wrong. Even when Sari had only laughed at them, it had been embarrassing and uncomfortable, and Optimus had wished for some sort of instructions, something that they could simply *read* so they could stop making mistakes.

Though Prowl had never needed such a thing.

He pushed that thought out of his processor *hard*.

That failure was one he doubted he would ever be able to face.

At least they'd finally adjusted, learnt how to work with humans, made friends and, alien as the term was, a family.

Optimus offlined his optics. He'd longed for Cybertron, an ache in his spark that never had truly dissipated. Everything different on Earth had reminded him of Cybertron, of home, and he wanted desperately to see mecha he didn't know in the streets, to not worry about how small everything was, to not be stared at.

And then they'd returned and everything had gone wrong.

Cybertron wasn't the home he'd remembered.

He'd been used to the propaganda—anyone who'd been raised in a city was—but it had never taken such a nasty bent before, outright encouraging paranoia. Mecha muttered, watched each other with intolerant optics, stepped away from any military bot with a mixture of fear and reverence that sat very badly with Optimus. They were *frightened*.

And like any frightened creatures, they had turned with vicious rage on anything helpless. The things shouted at Megatron as the procession wound its way through Iacon still made Optimus's plating crawl. He'd told Megatron that he didn't deserve offlining.

Now, he wondered if his decision to spare Megatron had been a greater cruelty than any sentient being deserved.

There was a movement behind him. Optimus jerked upright and looked over his shoulder.

Ratchet shuffled over to the dispenser, optics still dim with recharge. "Need anything, kid?"

"No, thank you." Optimus gestured to the empty container on the table next to him. "I've already fueled. And thank you. For offering me a place to stay. I...I should probably be applying to a new set of quarters in military housing—"

"That where Sentinel's been living?" Ratchet looked suspiciously at him over the edge of his own

container.

Optimus nodded.

“Yeah, stay here,” said Ratchet. “We can keep the rabble out—and believe me, you won’t want to live anywhere the newsbots can get *in*.” He added something, barely audible, and went back to his fuel.

Optimus returned to looking out the window. Ratchet, perhaps, had the right idea—he’d handed in his resignation and applied for a position as a research consultant at the Iacon Military Hospital. No orders, no politics. Just doing what he was built to do—healing.

“Come on, let’s get this over with,” said Ratchet.

Optimus followed him.

After all, it appeared that following was the only thing he couldn’t frag up.

---

The question of *why* he was doing this arose with new immediacy as he submitted to a through search, no less embarrassing for the senior warden’s constant reassurances about these being needless precautions, that he hoped Optimus wouldn’t take offense, and so on. Optimus ex-vented, tried not to roll his optics, and ignored him as best he could, while envying Ratchet. Ratchet had wisely elected to remain in the small office outside security and get caught up on various papers he needed to read.

“And don’t worry, sir,” the warden added, as Optimus stepped into the prison proper. “It will be perfectly safe. He will be fully restrained and will be sedated immediately if he shows any violent tendencies.”

Optimus wanted to say *I’m not worried about that*, but it didn’t seem appropriate—and it would have been a lie. He remained silent.

“I would also like to thank you, sir,” said the warden. “It is important to his rehabilitation that he have outside contact from an individual who will not reinforce his previous patterns of behavior. Even if his statements—he may, of course, be verbally abusive—seem to demonstrate no such progress, I assure you that you will be assisting us greatly.”

Optimus nodded curtly. The warden pressed a servo to a reader on the door and it chirruped, sliding aside. “He’s ready to see you, sir.”

Optimus stepped into the room.

And froze.

A forcefield separated him from Megatron, who knelt in the middle of the floor, held there by a hard-light restraint around his neck. Warframe-grade stasis cuffs restrained his servos; loops of hard light shackled his stabilizers to the floor, their cold gleam reflecting off the polished white walls and ceiling.

The door slid shut.

“So are you content, former Magnus?” Megatron looked up at him, optics a sullen red glow. The

corner of his mouth curled in a sneer.

“I don’t understand,” said Optimus.

Megatron tried to straighten up, only managed to move slightly. “Are you content to be ousted because they’ve found a more biddable mech? Are you content to be a toy?”

“Why did you call me here?”

“Was it worth it, Optimus Prime?” Megatron noted his wince at that. The smirk grew. “Was it worth losing your ally? Who did his sacrifice serve? Cybertron? Or the mewling nobles who hold your leash?”

“To save the innocents who you were content to kill,” snapped Optimus. “Or do organics not matter to you?”

“Perhaps you should ask your masters that,” said Megatron.

“Is there a point to this?”

“I spend enough time answering questions as it is,” said Megatron. He settled himself as comfortably as he could in the restraints. “Is it too much to believe that I might desire some conversation with an old...enemy?”

“I’m hardly an old enemy,” said Optimus.

“Or that did not involve Decepticon troop distributions,” said Megatron.

“So instead you’re taunting me.”

“No,” said Megatron, that damn smirk reappearing. “No. Bringing up uncomfortable topics of discussion. Not taunting.”

“If I learned one thing on Earth it was that you always have a plan,” said Optimus, losing his temper. “So what is it, Megatron? What unimaginably complex and important plan requires that you question me about my *emotional state*?”

It was a slight movement, a flicker of optics downward, but Megatron seemed to shrink, diminish. The only sound in the room was the deep rumble of Megatron’s flight engines, a rough idle induced by subpar fuel.

The silence stretched on. Optimus began to feel as if he were in the wrong, that he had attacked unfairly a defenseless and frightened creature.

“Forget that,” said Optimus, putting a servo to his helm. “It doesn’t matter.”

Megatron looked up at him again, mouth twisting. “Of course not,” he said. “Since when did the motivations of a flightframe *matter* to a dutiful Autobot?”

Optimus stared at him, utterly confused.

“Think on those two little flyer friends of yours,” said Megatron. “Flightframes. Built for war, onlined for war. Why do you think they’re so small, Prime? Each on his own is easily damaged, if he doesn’t get out of the way. They’re *disposable*. Like your big shuttle friend. Ask Ratchet if he has a kill-code—”



The stasis cuffs activated. Megatron arched, mouth opening in a silent cry, then slumped forward.

The doors on the other side of the forcefield opened, and two orderlies with a gurney rushed in and disconnected the restraints from the floor. The sound of the door behind him opening as well made Optimus turn.

“I do apologize,” said the senior warden. “He hasn’t had one of these relapses in some time.”

“He didn’t try to attack me,” snapped Optimus. “That was unnecessary.”

“On the contrary, arresting these episodes as quickly as possible is entirely necessary to his treatment,” said the warden. “Our aim is not to punish, but to rehabilitate.”

“That didn’t look like rehabilitation to me,” said Optimus.

“I assure you, it is perfectly painless. All the restraints are programmed to do is put the subject into stasis to prevent further agitation. Now, sir, I believe your companion is waiting for you. Allow me to escort you to the receiving area.”

## Chapter 4

Optimus was moping again.

He hadn't said a thing since they returned to Ratchet's living quarters, just returned to staring out the window. Ratchet knew slagging well he couldn't do a thing to make it better; he simply informed Optimus that Bumblebee, Bulkhead and Jazz were due sometime later that decacycle, and went back to his readings.

Optimus still said nothing.

Ratchet retreated to his own rooms to leave him in peace.

What the slag had Megatron *said* to the kid? For someone who refused to remember Optimus's name, he was slagging *good* at getting under the kid's plating.

Not that it would take much. Kid still hadn't dealt with Prowl's death. Optimus refused to talk about it, slunk away whenever Prowl was mentioned, and stared out the window for hours on end. Jazz wasn't doing much better. He and Prowl had planned to sparkbond.

Optimus was assiduously avoiding Jazz, too, which was hardly helpful.

Ratchet was going to have to find something for Optimus to do while he was on leave, or the sheer force of misery would drive him out of his own living quarters. Taking him to the research facility was out of the question; he was undeniably too squeamish.

Ratchet let out a heavy ventilation and put the paper he'd been reading aside. The apartment was tidy, so he couldn't rope Optimus into that. Enroll him in a history course somewhere? No, that was slagging well propaganda and everyone knew it.

The idea popped into Ratchet's processor so abruptly that he sat up straight and grinned. The medical library. Dusty old datapads. No oil or lubricant or components, just datapads. *Historical* datapads. Kid would love it. It would give him something to do, and he'd feel really useful while he did it. And Ratchet did need that information in any case... It certainly wouldn't be work for the sake of work, which was absolutely essential—Optimus was bright enough to know that it was useless and would simply mope more.

The doorchime interrupted his thoughts. He grumbled, "On my way," and stomped out to answer it. Optimus had put the datapad he'd been reading down—at least he'd stopped staring out the window—and was trying to neaten the already neat table up. Ratchet pretended not to notice.

The little room exploded into noise as soon as the door opened to admit Bumblebee. Ratchet covered his faceplates with a servo as Bumblebee made directly for Optimus, "I can't believe the Council were so glitched that they threw you out! And they picked *Sentinel*? Bot wouldn't know his motherboard from a trash compacter! Oh, oh, and is it true that you don't—"

Ratchet clapped a hasty servo over Bumblebee's intake before the little glitch could say anything worse. "Enough, kid," he said. "The newsbots are bad enough without you joining in."

"What do you mean, newsbots? There aren't any newsbots around!"

Ratchet debated resisting the urge to roll his optics, decided not to. "That's because they don't know he's here yet."

Optimus looked down at his servos, shoulders hunching.

“Hey, boss-bot,” said Bulkhead, sitting down next to him. “We got a ping from Sari. She’s coming to visit. She can’t wait to see you.”

Optimus forced himself to straighten up. “That’s...good to hear,” he said after a moment. “When will she be here?”

Ratchet ex-vented, relieved, and settled himself in his usual spot.

Bumblebee was chattering excitedly about all the things Sari had told him about her new school—the humans called it college, apparently—and all the pranks she and her classmates were planning when there was another chime from the door. Ratchet went to answer it, and found Jazz on the stoop.

The bot who had returned with him to Earth and the bot who’d accepted the fictitious Longarm Prime’s post as head of Autobot Intelligence were two very different mecha. It should be sparkbreaking, but Ratchet had already seen far too much of it. Ratchet just nodded to him—a good thing in and of itself that he was here at all, instead of buried in work—and stepped aside to let him in.

Jazz met Optimus’s optics, and looked away. Optimus pretended to examine the table closely. Ratchet sighed, allowed the door to close, and steered the conversation onto a nice, neutral subject. Arguments over lob teams were, after all, perfectly distracting, even if he didn’t care about half of it.

And it didn’t involve Optimus’s current difficulties.

Optimus had something of an idea of what was going on, and could at least watch Jazz and Bumblebee bicker—a rather subdued bicker on Jazz’s part—and Bulkhead occasionally step in on Jazz’s side. There was even the ghost of a smile from him—

And then someone’s comm went off.

“Sorry,” said Optimus, getting up. “It’s mine. I have to take this.” He vanished down the hall. A moment later they heard his voice rise as he answered the comm, brittle and professional.

“He’s not doin’ too well,” said Jazz quietly.

“No,” said Ratchet. “He’s not.”

“Is it about...” Jazz didn’t say anything more, only looked aside, mouth tightening.

“I think so,” said Ratchet, too used to that little gesture for it to be unclear.

Bumblebee opened his mouth to say something, but Optimus reappeared around the corner, and Bumblebee for once in his life thought better of it and went quiet.

“I’m sorry, I have to go,” said Optimus, not looking at any of them. “Orders.”

“What sort of orders?” Ratchet clambered to his stabilizers, articulators creaking in protest.

“To meet with Sentinel Magnus,” said Optimus.

## Chapter 5

Sentinel had taken over the office thoroughly. There was little of Ultra Magnus's austere, obsessive neatness left, still less of Optimus's equally austere but brief tenure. There were thin-sheet documents on the walls, a new and shiny plaque on the desk. Optimus would have been quite willing to bet that Sentinel had filed down the legs on every chair but his to make himself seem taller.

He hid those thoughts behind a blank mask of neutrality and stopped before the desk, standing to attention and saluting. "You asked to see me?" he said, and then belatedly, "Sir?"

"As a matter of fact I did," said Sentinel. Even with Optimus's lapse in manners, he was smiling, and Optimus knew by long experience that was a very bad sign. He resisted the urge to reset his vocalizer.

"How are things, Optimus old buddy?" said Sentinel. He leaned back in his chair. "Heard you had an excursion earlier today."

"Yes, sir," said Optimus.

"To the Stockade, no less," said Sentinel. "To see Megatron?"

"Yes sir," said Optimus. "By his request. His approved request."

"Of course," said Sentinel, smugly. "How impertinent of him."

Optimus fixed his optics on a point some distance above Sentinel's shoulder. "Sir, I must express my severe reservations about the conditions under which Megatron is being held—"

"They're better than a Decepticon prison would be, Optimus," said Sentinel. He rose, glanced lazily over his shoulder, as if the subject didn't matter much, but Optimus heard the warning edge in his voice. "Besides, he deserves it. Or are you getting soft on the 'cons now?"

Optimus remained exactly where he was. "No sir," he said. "Only concerned about sentient-rights abuses—"

"You know what your problem is, Optimus? You think too much. That's why I'm here," Sentinel stabbed a finger down onto the desk, hard, "and you're not."

Optimus said nothing, kept his gaze fixed on the wall.

"What do you say to that?" snapped Sentinel.

It was embarrassing how easy it was to say, "Yes sir," but he'd had too much practice by now. Sentinel stepped out from behind the desk, running a hand along its surface.

"Ultra Magnus was right the first time," he said. "Being a hero really isn't in your coding. You're much better off when you know what your place is." He met Optimus's optics, or tried to; Optimus stared at his left audial instead. "So tell me, what are you doing to fill all the spare time you have? Taken up lobbing? I hope not. You probably haven't improved since our Academy days."

"Is there a point to this, *sir*?" said Optimus, unable to contain himself.

"You don't have to be on indefinite leave, Optimus," said Sentinel, leaning close. "Make the right... connections and you'll get yourself a new command. Maybe even with Bumblebee and Bulkhead."

It'll be easy enough."

"What sort of connections?" Optimus looked sidelong at him, and Sentinel smirked, putting a servo on his arm, digits crooking in a way both suggestive and far from professional.

"I'm sure you remember," he said. "Face it, Optimus. You're not getting a command on your own. Not with your spectacular record of so dramatically fragging things up. You can land in a pile of energon and come up covered in scrap."

"No," said Optimus, too quickly to be polite. He pulled away from that servo. His tank lurched, the prospect incredibly repulsive. "No. I am *not* doing that again, Sentinel. It's wrong and—"

"Oh, come on, Optimus." Sentinel was trying to be charming again. "You know you enjoyed it."

"My answer is no," snapped Optimus. "We're done. Done, am I clear?"

He expected Sentinel to object, to complain, to threaten or rage—but Sentinel simply looked down and said, "Your loss, Optimus."

Optimus, knowing himself to be dismissed, turned to leave. He could feel Sentinel's optics on the back of his neck. But it didn't seem like much compared to the relief.

The thought of Sentinel's servos on him made his plating crawl. He'd made that mistake *once*, and the two stellar cycles of that relationship he considered the worst of his existence—still more so because at the time, he'd believed himself lucky to be the center of Sentinel's attention, that he'd been forgiven for Elita, that it was the best thing that could have happened to him.

He rubbed at the plating of the arm Sentinel had touched, disgusted. He'd failed *thoroughly* if the Council had replaced him with Sentinel, after the spectacular failure that Sentinel's last attempt at leadership had been. Maybe he could hope that Sentinel would frag up in a similar way. Maybe he wouldn't last more than a few orns.

"Optimus Prime?"

Recognizing the voice, Optimus stopped and turned. "Alpha Trion, sir. I apologize. I didn't hear you approach."

The corner of Alpha Trion's mouth quirked. "No offense taken," he said. "I am glad to see you; we are long overdue to talk."

During the short stellar cycle Optimus had spent as Magnus, he'd seen very little of Alpha Trion; the councilmember had far preferred his datapads to politics or company. "Sir?"

"Walk with me," said Alpha Trion.

"Yes sir," said Optimus.

"I understand that you are interested in history," said Alpha Trion, and Optimus reset his optics, confused. Surely, Alpha Trion had pulled him aside to talk about something more important than his hobbies.

"I am, sir," he said, cautiously.

"Good," said Alpha Trion. They stopped in front of the doors that lead to the library. "Please, come in."

Optimus obeyed. The doors closed.

“Better,” said Alpha Trion, touching a device on the desk. “We are alone,” he said. “You may speak freely; even your friend in Intelligence cannot listen in here.”

“I don’t understand,” said Optimus, nervousness rising in his intake. Was this some sort of trick?

“Doubtless you have questions,” said Alpha Trion. He moved away from the door. “Unless, of course, I am very much mistaken, in which case you are free to go. But I at least owed you an explanation for why I voted to remove you from the position of Magnus, and condoned Sentinel’s reinstatement, given that he is an incompetent aft.”

“I...” He had no words for that. Absolutely no words. He had to make a conscious effort to close his mouth, which likely made a wonderful impression on Alpha Trion.

“I voted to remove you for a number of reasons. Including that you are not destined to be anything so mundane as a Magnus.”

Optimus stared at him. Alpha Trion looked amused, if he saw some joke in this Optimus could not.

“Destiny is not a particularly simple or concrete concept,” he said, “but rather an extrapolation based on what has happened before. You are educated; you know we live in a reality with many universes, many ways things have happened or might happen.” He waited for Optimus to nod. “Have you ever wondered what fates befell your counterparts?”

Optimus shook his helm. “With all respect, sir, I don’t understand.”

Alpha Trion inclined his helm. “I shall take that as a no,” he said, then shrugged, a peculiar gesture from a bot his size. “How fare your friends? Ratchet?”

“Very well,” said Optimus, answering on automatic, still stunned by the change of subject. “Ratchet accepted the research position at the Military Hospital.”

“I am glad to hear that,” said Alpha Trion. “His research proposal was most interesting, and will yield valuable data, no matter the results. It will be most necessary for treating many patients. Including Ultra Magnus.”

“Yes sir,” said Optimus.

“You’re probably wondering how Sentinel managed to regain the post of Magnus after he did such an...impressive job of it during the recent conflict,” said Alpha Trion. Optimus stared at him, trying to keep up with the change of subject. Alpha Trion looked amused, as if discomfiting Optimus was the most fun he’d had all day, and continued, “It is because they believe themselves able to control him. He is selfish, and shortsighted, and none too bright; offer him the correct motivations and he is quite easy to lead. You, on the other hand, are not.” He looked aside and added in an undertone, “As always.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“Ratchet did mention he had a project for you. The bulk of the research he wishes you to examine is stored here in the medical wing of the library.” He paused again, and Optimus had the very distinct sense that his reaction was important. Unfortunately, he had no idea of how he was expected to react.

“Thank you, sir,” he hazarded at last.

“That floor also contains sensitive material,” said Alpha Trion. “You will need a keycode to access the area; you should be receiving it soon. I look forward to seeing you again, Optimus Prime.” There was an emphasis on the title, as if it were a far greater honorific.

Optimus saluted, not knowing what else to do. “Thank you sir,” he said, and turned to leave.

The ping with the keycode arrived as he turned out the door and down the hall, utterly confused. It had been a bizarre conversation. Perhaps Alpha Trion was becoming somewhat eccentric in his old age.

And if he was to be believed, Ratchet had just assigned him to be in close contact with him for some time. Wonderful. Optimus’s shoulders slumped. He was not looking forward to more of those abrupt changes of subject, or the feeling that he was missing something or other significant. Who would think about their counterparts in the multiverse? It was all theoretical, all absurd, and it struck him as somewhat narcissistic.

After all, it was highly unlikely *any* of his counterparts had ever achieved something remotely interesting.

## Chapter 6

An orn passed.

Optimus seemed to settle down. Ratchet even managed to provoke something like a genuine smile out of him a few times. And as long as the conversation stayed off of Prowl and Sentinel, he seemed cheerful enough. Remarkably so, indeed, especially for a mech on half-pay as a result of not being on active duty.

Ratchet's own salary was more than an old worn-out bot could ever hope to use. He told Optimus that the rent was two-thirds its actual amount, and quietly made up the difference himself. Kid had enough slag to worry about.

Alpha Trion was being maddeningly mum on his reading of Optimus's state of processor. When Ratchet pushed, Alpha Trion retreated into making vague comments about destiny. Ratchet snapped that destiny damn well had its work cut out for it, and had better hurry the frag up, because Sentinel was getting more ensconced by the day. Alpha Trion blinked and changed the subject. Ratchet stalked off in a huff. It was all very well for the mech to act mysterious and all-knowing, but it was a real bot in the balance. Treating it as a game was *unacceptable*.

The next day, Omega contacted Ratchet. He sounded worried. Ratchet commed Arcee, and together they headed down to the shuttle docks.

"There were bots asking about you, Ratchet," said Omega. "And Optimus. And Megatron." His plating rattled faintly at the last name. "They were not nice. I do not think it was for a good reason."

"What sort of questions?" Ratchet's intake was suddenly dry.

"If you'd said anything treasonous," said Omega. "I said no. I know you said the thing about Sentinel Magnus and the cleaning droid but I don't think it counts."

The mention of that comment alone made Ratchet wince. It had preluded a long discussion of interfacing with Omega—apparently *that* was something that had gotten neglected when giving him his usual upgrades, and Ratchet was damned if it was unintentional.

"Thank you, Omega," he said instead.

"I am glad I did the right thing," said Omega.

---

Ratchet was left in the unenviable position of feeling uneasy and suspicious, with nothing to base said suspicions on. He didn't mention the incident to Optimus. Optimus had enough problems.

Two solar cycles later, Ratchet received a call from two officers of the Elite Guard, a Minor and one of the newly appointed Primes. The conversation seemed to be going well enough, even with their reluctance to actually state their purpose, until the Prime steered it to the subject of Omega Supreme.

Fuel requirements. Strategic value. Intelligence. Loyalty. Peacetime usefulness.

They were hardly seven questions in when Ratchet lost his temper.



“What the frag is this about?”

The officers looked at each other. It was the Prime who spoke.

“Orders. They want to know if he ought to be transferred to a Military Research Division wardship.”

The atmosphere left Ratchet’s vents. “Ward” was a nice word for “experimental subject”. In such a wardship, Omega would have no legal rights. The Military Research Division, the group that had created him, operated entirely outside of ethics oversight. Unlike any legitimate research group, they could do whatever they wanted, answerable only to the Elite Guard. Omega’s programmed dependence on him, Omega’s harshly limited processor, the kill-codes Ratchet carried in case Omega ever started questioning his orders, all those were only possible outside of scientific ethics. Perhaps one could make an argument for the demands of war in Omega’s creation.

Ratchet wouldn’t.

“No,” he said. “He shouldn’t. Get out, now.”

The Prime almost protested. The Minor saw this and dragged her superior officer out of the room before he got flattened.

Optimus was horrified, and brooded all that night. Ratchet knew. He saw the light under Optimus’s door while he paced in the social area of the hab-suite.

He didn’t waste time on anger. They’d saved Cybertron’s tailpipe. Ratchet had been around too long to expect any advantage from that. The question was what to do next.

The file he saved in the most secure part of his processor, a part that even Shockwave would have found difficult to access, caught his attention several times. A few times he even opened it and spent running over the comm frequency it contained, scrutinizing the memories attached to it, trying to justify calling it.

No. Once he put that into a terminal, there would be no return. Ratchet was angry, certainly. He was not yet a traitor. There were other ways to deal with this, legal ways. There were people who owed him favors. Deeply personal favors, the sort not overridden by political expediency.

He just hoped he had enough of them to call in, and that whoever was pulling the wires on this one wasn’t a bigger cybershark than he.

## Chapter 7

Optimus got the call in the early afternoon of the solar cycle Sari was supposed to show up. “Optimus, it’s Bumblebee. Sari and me, we’re having a little trouble. Can you come down here? Like, now?”

“Trouble where?”

No answer.

Optimus rose, tapped the datapads into better order, and started for the exit. Alpha Trion wasn’t at his desk, a relief. He didn’t lie explaining himself to Alpha Trion. He especially didn’t like the way Alpha Trion seemed to know the explanation before he finished it. It was unnerving as Pit.

A call from Bulkhead. “Boss-bot, Bumblebee and Sari are in trouble. I think we’re gonna need you.”

“Where?” *For what?* was what he actually wanted to ask, but it wasn’t of immediate use.

“Spacebridge terminus,” said Bulkhead. “Security issue. Boss-bot, it’s not their fault. It’s something to do with security, and the Military Research Division.”

Military Research Division. It was like a douse of cold oil. Optimus didn’t waver with an effort, sped up considerably over the speed limitations. “How long do we have?”

“I think they’re waiting for orders,” said Bulkhead.

Optimus commed Ratchet.

“What?” snapped Ratchet. “Arcee and I—”

“I need you two to meet me by the spacebridge terminus. MRD detained Sari.”

A moment of telling silence.

“On our way,” said Ratchet.

---

Optimus didn’t transform until he stopped right in front of the senior officer guarding Sari and Bumblebee—a gesture of some disrespect, as one usually approached pede rather than in alt. “What is the meaning of this?”

“Military Research Division business,” said the officer, a Minor. “Move along.”

Optimus looked past him. “Sari, Bumblebee, are you all right?”

“Yeah,” said Bumblebee, his smile a little weak, “Fine now that you’re here, boss-bot.”

“Now just tell these boneheads to let us go,” said Sari. “We’ve been here for *ages*.”

“Release them,” said Optimus.

The Minor sneered at him. “On whose authority?”

“Mine,” said Optimus.

“Look, I don’t know who you think you are, but the techno-organic isn’t going *anywhere*. Cybertron Military Research Division orders. It’s not even got its proper licenses, either.”

Optimus pulled the datapad with all the documents declaring Sari’s legal status out of subspace and handed it to the Minor. “That techno-organic helped bring down Megatron,” he said. “What have you done for your planet recently, *Minor*?”

The Minor looked down at the datapad. “Everything seems to be in order,” he said, and the resentment in his voice should have offlined the mech on the spot.

“Yes, everything *is* in order,” said Optimus, and pushed past him. “Come on, Sari, Bumblebee, let’s go.” To the Minor, he said, “Keep that. I have other copies.”

“Wait,” said the Minor. “The Research Division *clearly stated*—”

“Refer them to me,” said Optimus. “My comm frequency should be on there.”

The Minor looked down again, then up. “Optimus Prime?” he said.

“Yes.”

“Er,” the Minor was now obviously uncomfortable, obviously out of his depth. He winced when Ratchet and Arcee arrived, transforming with as little courtesy as Optimus had. “Optimus Prime, sir, I have orders regarding you, too.”

Optimus looked over his shoulder. “And what would those be?”

“That Sentinel Magnus would like to see you at your earliest convenience, sir.”

Optimus paused, then kept walking.

“And Medical Officer Ratchet, sir,” said the Minor.

Ratchet stopped in his tracks. “That is ‘Doctor’ to you,” he said. “What is it?”

“Military Research Division would like to thank you for your help, sir,” said the Minor.

“My help,” said Ratchet, flat.

“Yes, sir, and they’d like to consult you, sir.”

“On what?”

“Your work on traumatic processor injuries, sir. Here’s the research director’s contact information, and they’d like to see you at your earliest convenience.”

Ratchet snorted, took the dataslip from the Minor’s servo. “Seems like they’re finally doing something useful,” he said.

Optimus didn’t say it, but he doubted that.

---

The incident cast a pall over Sari's visit, though she and Bumblebee still had fun sight-seeing and she seemed sorry to go back to Earth and college by the end of her stay.

"Hey," she said to Optimus as they waited for the spacebridge, "Look out for yourself, okay?"

"I will. Thank you, Sari," said Optimus.

He was sure that the call he made to Sentinel after that didn't fall under 'taking care' of himself, but it was necessary.

"Sentinel, we need to talk."

"Oh yes, old buddy," said Sentinel, sounding altogether too smug. "We do."

## Chapter 8

Ratchet needed a drink, but he was too slagging *mad* to actually get drunk. If he got drunk, he'd forget why he was so angry, and he couldn't do that.

Besides, he'd probably purge his tanks if he tried to fuel.

He was sitting very still at the table in the living area, elbows propped on the steel surface, servos folded in front of him. If he didn't move them, Optimus wouldn't see them tremble and he desperately wanted to keep it that way. He'd only stopped his armor rattling in time for Optimus to come through the door.

Optimus crossed the room, not looking at him, and vanished into his own berthroom, not saying anything. Ratchet turned his attention back to the pad in front of him.

Orns. He'd put orns of work into this slagging thing, and then to have them take his research and turn it into *this!* It was an abomination of everything science and medicine *was*. The other medical officers in this had sworn the same oaths he had, but they didn't seem to remember.

*"I swear by Solomus and Epistimus and the Powers Lesser and Greater, and the One that comprises them this, to first do no harm, and work in the service of Life and the Living, to ease suffering and defy Mortlius and all other of Her workings in this world. I shall make no change not in service to this aim; I shall consider those under my care cadre and never do knowing wrong unto them; I shall keep secret all they entrust me with, save for that which must be entrusted to others for their healing. May the Powers of the Universe bear witness to this my oath, and may my function be long and miserable should I break it."*

Looking down at the pad, it seemed that plenty of the doctors involved here were having long but noticeably not miserable functions. Ratchet growled deep in his vocalizer.

"Ratchet?" said Optimus, stepping into the main room. "Are you all right?"

Ratchet took a deep, shuddering ventilation. Optimus came over and sat across from him.

*Frag it*, thought Ratchet. *It's necessary to healing*. "You recall the project they've got me working on?"

Optimus nodded.

"Take a look at this." Ratchet slid a datapad across the table, marked heavily as confidential, in glyphs carrying the highest authority. Even Sentinel wouldn't be able to get this without a consensus from the Council itself.

"Is this..." Optimus gave Ratchet a suspicious look, which the medic returned with a glare. "Are you supposed to be showing this to me?"

"No and shut up and read."

Optimus did.

He stared at the diagrams before him a long moment before realizing what he was looking at and recoiling. "This..."

“They said they were working on processor damage,” growled Ratchet, and slid a can of oil across the table to Optimus, did not touch his own. “Repairing it. Knowing the specific effects so that it can be repaired, to be precise. And *this* is what they’re really using it for.”

Optimus looked down at the diagrams again. From the way his intake twisted, his tanks were just as unsettled as Ratchet’s. “This is Lugnut.”

“Yeah, they’re declaring him a success.”

“But half his processor is offline!”

“Exactly. He can repeat things. He’s really good at repeating things. You play a speech at him for long enough, he can repeat it for you. You praise him for it, he does it even better.” Ratchet’s servos clenched. “Hasn’t got enough of a processor to comprehend what he’s saying, but he can say it. They say it’s a successful rehabilitation.”

“This is revolting,” said Optimus.

“They’re planning the same for Megatron and Shockwave, of course. They want it to be more refined. That’s why they’ve called me in.”

“But they can’t—this is just as bad as anything the Decepticons did!”

“Worse,” said Ratchet. “Yeah, if you’d been captured during the war, they’d have tortured you or hacked you or worse, but at the least, they’d leave your personality subroutines alone.”

Optimus handed the datapad back. “We have to stop them.”

“Thought you’d say as much, kid.” Centuries of caution were overridden. Ratchet abruptly didn’t care if he was being spied on. He looked across the table at Optimus’s startled, shocked face and said, “Ever thought of becoming an opposition leader?”

Optimus snorted. “It’d never work. Who would follow me? I’m a jumped-up spacebridge technician.”

“Because losing your position was entirely due to your own lack of qualifications rather than the Senate being slagging terrified of you.” Ratchet grinned at the way Optimus looked up at him, startled by the sarcasm. “You ever wonder *why* the Senate is so slagging terrified of you, kid?”

Optimus ducked his head, embarrassed. “Because I defeated Megatron?”

Ratchet snorted. “No,” he said. “They’re listening to Sentinel right now; he’s done his damndest to make it seem like a fluke, a stroke of luck rather than any sign of military prowess on your part. No, it’s not that. It’s not your popularity, either, though that’s plenty nervous-making for some of the Senate.” Ratchet leaned back, and grinned, feeling sickened anger turn to something else, something sharp.

“*You would make a good Decepticon,*” words in a cave on a benighted planet centuries ago. Well, he certainly wasn’t a Decepticon, would go to the scrapyards not a Decepticon, but that didn’t mean he couldn’t take a screen from their reader. “You get taught *anything* about the Primes from your history vids?”

Optimus gave him a perfectly blank look. Ratchet flapped a servo. “No, not the rank, kid, the *real* Primes. Blessed by Primus. Matrix of Leadership. The political and spiritual leader to all Cybertron. Could tell a Magnus to stuff it up his tailpipe without shuttering an optic. Good, you’re nodding.

“Two things you don’t know: one, the Primes of old had this tendency to get resurrected. They’d go offline defending Cybertron, and as often as not, the Allspark would bring ‘em back. A few times, the Allspark brought ‘em back to *receive* the Matrix in the first place. Got to the point where you’d leave the Prime’s body next to the Allspark to make sure that this time he was *really* dead. You offlined, gunmetal gray and all of that, and the Allspark resurrected you. Not a proxy, not *just* that key, but the actual, real, honest-to-Primus Allspark interfered. Unsettling? Yes. Especially if you’re on the Senate and hearing about this *second* bit of news.” Ratchet’s grin got bigger. “The second bit of news being—exclusive knowledge to the higher-ups, and to yours truly, because there are people there who owe me *favours*—that the Matrix is acting up.”

“Acting up how?”

“Clear-the-Primal-Basilica-and-send-for-the-scholars acting up,” said Ratchet. That information had cost him several favours, but it was worth it. “We have records of it doing this before, of course, lots of them, so people know what it means. It’s looking for someone.”

Optimus reset his optics several times. “And they think it’s me? I’m not the only one who’s been resurrected by the Allspark, Ratchet! Starscream and his clones, for example—”

Ratchet snorted. “Try to imagine Starscream as a Prime and get back to me on that one, would you? You’re *popular*, Optimus, you fit the right profile in people’s processors, and you don’t let the Senate control you. You inheriting the Matrix would be a *nightmare* for most politicians.”

“Oh,” said Optimus, but it was clear he didn’t believe it.

Ratchet huffed out a ventilation. “You want confirmation? Go talk to Alpha Trion. He’s got the historical records. Put Sentinel off a few days, it’ll teach him patience.”

“He’s put me off a few days *anyway*,” said Optimus. “Fine.”

Ratchet reached for his oil, and forced himself to drink. “Good.”

## Chapter 9

He followed Ratchet's advice. When Alpha Trion drifted by with an armful of datapads, Optimus stood, reset his vocalizer, and asked, "Sir? May I ask? What do you know about the Primes?"

He flinched as Alpha Trion's full attention rested on him, feeling scrutinized and laid bare by something incredibly old and wise.

"I do not think that is what you meant to ask," said Alpha Trion. "I think what you meant to ask was, *What can you tell me about Optimus Prime?*"

"I uh," said Optimus. "About me?"

Alpha Trion didn't smile, just looked at him. "You as you might be. You as you are, elsewhere."

The conversation had well and truly slipped out of his servos. Optimus shut his intake and stared.

"The Multiverse," said Alpha Trion. "We have spoken of it before, all the thousand things you are and will be, that all of us are and will be."

"Oh," said Optimus.

"So you wish me to tell you about yourself," said Alpha Trion, sounding bemused. "What of it shall I tell you? There is nearly too much to choose from. Perhaps I should simply say this. There are many versions of Optimus Prime throughout the multiverse. Some are good. Some are unimaginably evil. None are insignificant. So tell me, young Prime, why is it that you think you will be any different?"

"I don't understand," said Optimus. "How is that possible?" *I'm a failure, an Elite Guard washout, a Magnus reject. Even when success is handed to me, I can't do anything right.*

*Defeating Megatron was due to the skill and courage of my teammates.*

*And Prowl.*

He couldn't meet Alpha Trion's optics anymore, and flinched, looked down. "I have done nothing remarkable, sir," he said.

"Yet." There was a smile in Alpha Trion's words. "It is a small but important word, yet."

Optimus couldn't help himself. He snorted. And then froze in horror at his rudeness.

But Alpha Trion seemed amused. "You are not so different from your counterparts, save in circumstance. You are far more than you believe yourself to be. And I greatly doubt that you will fall short of my expectations."

Optimus glanced up, disbelieving, and Alpha Trion *was* smiling now. "There are worlds where your name is a beacon of hope. There are worlds which owe their very survival to you. And there are worlds on which you are reviled and blamed. None of these things are important, not in the view of the universe.

"What is important is that Optimus Prime follows the dictates of his conscience."

And with that he was gone, humming something tuneless.



Optimus went back behind his workstation, feeling stunned and frustrated. The datapad he'd been working on caught his optic. Something riddled with inconsistencies, confusingly so. He picked it up and with a spurt of courage followed Alpha Trion. "Sir, wait a moment! I had a question about this —"

Alpha Trion stopped dead in the stacks. "Oh," he said. "That. It concerns the beginning of the war, does it not?"

"Yes?" said Optimus, and then felt like collapsing in on himself with embarrassment at how it came out as a question.

"And is heavily censored," said Alpha Trion. "Indeed, I think there is very little of the original left."

"The author keeps changing his mind," said Optimus. "He'll start with an argument that makes sense and then it'll change halfway through to something entirely different. It's supposed to be written from the perspective of the Decepticons, but it reads exactly like every villain's monologue in every play I've ever read."

"As I said, there is little of the original left," said Alpha Trion. "There are two authors. One, the original. The other, a nameless officer in the Intelligence Service. Would you like to meet the original author, Optimus?"

Optimus looked down at the datapad in his servo. *Towards Peace* burned on the top of the screen. "Yes," he said. "Yes, I think I would."

"Good. I have already arranged a meeting," said Alpha Trion. "I have sent the details to you. It is on my authority. You have no need to worry about...repercussions."

---

The next day, Optimus found himself in that force-fielded room again, looking at the occupant of the cell.

Megatron had not fared well in the intervening time. The red optics were narrowed to slits, unfocused, and for a moment Optimus had thought he was too late, that they'd already initiated the procedures Ratchet had told him of. The warden told him it was merely drugs, but he had not believed it until Megatron glanced up at him, a moment of focus, and smirked before bowing his helm again.

"So," said Megatron after a long time, and the word was mostly static. "So. What is...it, Autobot?"

Optimus remained silent.

A shift of light in those red optics as Megatron glanced at him again, not raising his helm. "Pity?"

"No," said Optimus.

A long pause. Megatron clearly had to concentrate on every word. "Pride?"

"No," said Optimus, more forcefully.

That flicker of light again, an attempt at a smile.

"I have two questions," said Optimus.

“Only...two?”

“Yes,” said Optimus. He wondered if Megatron would be able to respond properly like this, but he had to try. “First. Why did you start the war?”

“Had to,” said Megatron. He stopped. Optimus wondered if he’d fallen into recharge, but with a great effort he raised his helm, trembling as he did. “We were starving,” he said, quiet, but clear. “We were starving. The warframes... the warframes most. I...created a solution. To save my people. They went to war.” Deep, ragged ventilation. “To stop me. We...we were inconvenient. Wanted us to suicide.”

Optimus glanced over his shoulder, half-expecting Megatron to be shocked into stasis again. But he was not.

“Suicide?” he asked.

“The warframes. They wanted us...” Megatron trailed off and lowered his helm again. “They chose aliens.” A pause. “Aliens, first. Not us. Spare the aliens, kill us. Called it mercy.”

Optimus remembered the records from the war, the ones saying the Decepticons had wanted to turn Cybertron itself into a weapon to use against the rest of the galaxy. That was Megatron’s solution.

None of them had mentioned the fuel shortage.

“One other question,” he said.

Megatron did not move, optics fully offlined.

“One other question,” he said, more loudly, and Megatron’s optics snapped online. “What can you tell me about the Primes?”

Megatron raised his helm. “The Primes?” Clear shock on his faceplates. “One, yes, I knew.” He seemed to gather himself, and focused on Optimus. “One, a fool and a traitor, who betrayed me on the Council floor, ambushed and arrested me. I killed him, and escaped. We were friends, once.”

The murder of the Council. The blow that touched off the war, when Starscream and Megatron had approached the Council with the stated intent of presenting their plan, and instead murdered them, every mech.

Optimus had never heard mention of a Prime being involved.

Megatron’s helm lowered, optics offlined. “How I missed him,” he murmured. “How I miss him.”

He would not respond to any other question.

# Chapter 10

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“You know Sentinel’s gonna squash it,” said Jazz, looking down into the container of oil. “He won’t stand for it. Sure, it’s not *technically* illegal, but he’s not gonna stand for it.” He raised the container to his intake, put it down again. “What brought this on?”

“General concerns,” lied Ratchet. “More oil?”

Jazz snorted. “Ain’t got an appetite. Spying takes it out of ya.”

“Starving yourself isn’t going to shorten the grieving period,” said Ratchet.

Jazz’s intake twisted. “Yeah. Been told that already, Doc. I know it’d upset him too but that doesn’t make me any hungrier.” He lifted the container and gulped. “Was it this hard during the war?”

“Worse,” said Ratchet. “Prowl died saving lives. A lot of the people in the war died taking them.”

“Yeah.” Jazz was quiet a time. “I know he’s at peace. I know he’s saved a lot of people, and that he’s a slugging hero for what he did. And he’s one with the Allspark, and did it willingly. Which is great and all, but I’d rather have him back.”

“Yeah,” said Ratchet. “Me too, kid. Me too.”

“Hopefully, I’ll never have to do this again for anyone else,” said Jazz.

Ratchet put a servo on his shoulder. “Not for a long time, at the least.” Jazz looked up at him. He managed a smile. “Come by more often. Talk to Optimus. He needs it.”

Jazz managed something like a smile. “Bet he does. He and Prowl were close. Prowl suspected he had a thing for him but didn’t want to call him on it, the whole superior officer and consent thing being involved. Optimus would freak if he thought it was apparent he had that sort of interest in someone under his command. He wouldn’t want to make them uncomfortable.”

“Indeed,” said Ratchet, and his spark twisted. Optimus was handling things very well, considering that.

They sat in silence for a while. Jazz drank the rest of his oil as if it were medicine, stood up. “I should get back.”

“A moment,” said Ratchet. “I was curious. How much of MRD falls under your purview?”

Jazz looked at him. “Very little. Why do you ask?”

“They’ve called me in to consult,” said Ratchet. “Thought it might be you doing me a favor.”

Jazz snorted. “I know you well enough I wouldn’t. Not with Pharma as the project head. Is he as much of a pompous gasket in person?”

“Worse,” said Ratchet. “Horrid little upstart.” There were other things he wished to say, but none were wise to relate to the head of Intelligence.

Among them Pharma's glee in what his team had done to Lugnut.

"Sentinel's real happy about them," said Jazz. "Funny. I would have thought he couldn't science his way out of wet organic packaging material."

"Oh of course," said Ratchet, trying to hide the abrupt nausea. "Of course he's happy with them. Big guns."

"Heh," said Jazz. "True. Be seeing you, mech." He touched two fingers to the bill of his helm and grinned, something like his former grin.

Once he was gone, Ratchet drove a servo into the wall and snarled a curse at the floor. Times like this he wished he wasn't an atheist so he had someone to *blame* for how utterly fragging *stupid* everything was.

---

In the purple twilight of night-shift light, General Strika paced, servos clenching and folding at her sides, dentae bared. The lighting washed all color away, turning all to sullen grays, the mecha around her to shadows.

She liked it better that way. She thought better that way. The world was full of shades of gray, a massive shift of shadows, and it did not do to forget that. Even with all the evils of the Autobots, it did not do to forget what a price the Cause enacted, how foul the tools—weapons and mecha—she had been obliged to use. If you forgot, those tools might turn again and put dentae in you when you wished to have done with them.

And she had been part of a sapper team, scores of upgrades ago. The darkness came more naturally than light.

Strika paced.

They had a spacebridge. They needed access to another, and they could begin the business of in earnest again.

Or, they would, when the right leader was re-obtained.

Strika was no fool. Not for her Starscream's grandstanding. Oh, she could take Megatron's place, and serve well as the Emperor of Destruction. She had the competence, the political support, and the charisma to do so, if she so wished.

But Megatron...

...Megatron was the one the Autobots feared. Megatron was the one they told stories about. Be a good little protoform, or Lord Megatron will come and take you away. Megatron was a *symbol*, and if she ever said that aloud to him he would likely go into an insulted snit. Didn't make it any less true.

Strika was a name on Intelligence reports, not newschannels.

In short, Megatron was a tool, and one she did not wish to do without. She had other things to do besides being a replacement symbol.

Besides, he was the pretty one.

And if all this was terribly discourteous to her Lord and old friend, so be it. He was the one who'd

gotten his foolish aft captured.

She was a commander. She made things work. She moved supplies and armies and did all the math (one of Megatron's greatest failings) and wheedled or threatened Swindle/whatever quartermaster was failing to do xir job that vorn.

Megatron might be the one who threatened hapless worlds with the terrible wrath of the Decepticon Army, but Strika was the one who made sure the Decepticon Army showed up on time, to the right place, and with enough ammunition to actually visit the terrible wrath promised. When pressed, she could give a decent rallying speech, but she was not the one who went charging off to go and do inspiring heroic things all on his own, vanish for vorns at a time, get into showy epic single combat, and make noble speeches while dispatching his opponents with a smirk and panache. Megatron might make a show of elegance and dramatic flair while fencing with his opponents; Strika kicked them in the interface array and shot them through the spark while they were doubled over and groaning.

She was not a hero. She was a commander, a damned good one if she said so herself, and therefore recognized the value of a hero, an embodiment of the Cause, Primus help her, a *politician*.

People adored Megatron. People wrote *ballads* about Megatron. People did not write ballads about Strika, because there are not many lyrics one can come up with involving formations or supply calculations or beating the slag out of Swindle for trying to sell you stale energon. Besides, she didn't much like music. Musicians don't write songs for people who said things like 'I don't get it', 'sounds like Lugnut when he's had bad oil', and *loomed*.

Not even Decepticon musicians.

Now, with Megatron gone and Strika not filling his pedepoints, there was bickering. Bickering, on *her* ship, and this morning one load of the sorry drippans had tried to *offline* her. Not a hard problem, but it meant they weren't expecting Megatron back and expected her to advance—which meant power imbalances and all the lack of discipline that entailed. The second your troops started thinking that way, they started thinking of you as the enemy, and you might as well frag a mining drill for all your chances of success.

The Decepticons needed their symbol back.

Besides *that*, he had Lugnut with him. She wanted her consort back.

Rather a lot.

"You're gonna wear holes in the decking, sweetheart."

Strika looked sideways with a growl. Only one member of the crew was given to organic endearments.

Slipstream put both thrusters up on the console in front of her and examined her claws. "Fretting again?"

Strika turned fully to face the little Seeker, optics narrowed.

"Oh, right," said Slipstream, looking up over her claws at Strika, optics half-shuttered. "You don't fret, you analyze. How *is* that going? Are we going to have our *dear* Lord Megatron back before you go right through the decking and land on *poor* old Blackout's helm?"

"Keep running your vocalizer and I'll graft it into your exhaust port."

“Oooh, shaking in my thrusters over here. You can’t. We don’t have a medic. Knockout got his fool aft blown off last week, remember? For someone so worried about his finish, he did a fragged good job of ruining *mine*.”

“We have Oil Slick.”

“I wouldn’t trust him to change a light fixture.”

“All the more reason for you to behave.”

Slipstream was young and impertinent, but her intelligence outweighed everything, and she didn’t seem to suffer from her creator’s Chronic Backstabbing Syndrome. Indeed, the lack of rabid ambition (as opposed to healthy, garden-variety ambition, which she had in abundant supply) seemed to have moderately *increased* her common sense.

She was a promising commander. Strika had taken her under her (figurative) wing. They needed every bit of promise they could get.

“Is it the sparkbond?” said Slipstream.

“It’s not right,” said Strika. “He’s online, but it is not *right*.”

It was the most succinct way she could put it. She could *feel* Lugnut in the depths of her spark, always had, a part as natural to her as her own servos. Now, it was as if that servo was sluggish, aching, filled with a terrible wrongness. Not pain. Not fear. Just dull confused wrongness.

It was Lugnut, but as if the very spark of him were terribly ill, muffled and fading.

And it was growing.

Once, they had been able to speak clearly over that bond. They had always been able to feel clearly. Now, nothing clear.

She was scared, deep in the spark of her, scared in a way she would never admit even to Lugnut.

Far more scared than she had been in that cave on that long destroyed organic planet all those millennia ago.

*If this is what they have done to you, my spark, my flame, what have they done to our leader?*

There were no orders to be given now. They would wait on the success of the new agent on Cybertron. She was not risking her people in an all out assault without the bridges.

Now, there was only waiting until those orders could be given, and this one time, it was near impossible to bear it.

## Chapter End Notes

I forgot to note when I first posted this that the whole Commander vs Hero thing with Strika was inspired by conversations about Tamora Pierce's Protector of the Small series

I had with cousinswar--in one of those books, there is a discussion of what a commander does as versus what a hero does, and I wanted to include something about that.

# Chapter 11

## Chapter Notes

Warning: This chapter contains sexual coercion and self-harm.

Sentinel kept him waiting.

Optimus stood in the antechamber while voices rose and fell behind the Magnus's door. A large blue femme stood guard at the door, optics narrowed and servos folded.

He didn't attempt friendly conversation.

Some time later, the doors whooshed open, and Sentinel escorted a far smaller black and red femme with an almost organic helm shape from the room. To his surprise, Optimus noted she was a flightframe; long, elegant wings hiked up on her back, the powerful turbines idle for the moment. She wore no Autobrand, and that in itself made him stare.

She glanced at him, a cool, evaluating look, made strange indeed by her elaborately patterned faceplate. Optimus looked away, reset his vocalizer rapidly, and rubbed the back of his neck with a servo.

Sentinel smirked, escorted both femmes to the hallway. A brief conversation, Sentinel unctuous, the flightframe coolly correct, and the door closed behind them. Sentinel turned around.

"Oh, Optimus," he said. "You're early. Come on in."

Optimus followed him into the Magnus's office.

The door closed. Sentinel turned to face him.

"Look, Optimus old buddy, I have a very simple problem."

*What, you can't find your own aft with both hands and a map?* "And what would that be?" asked Optimus.

Sentinel walked up to him, put a hand on his shoulder guard. "I don't know if I can trust you."

Optimus stared at him, no idea what to say to that.

"You see, I'd like to trust you. Means I could justify reining in the Council a bit as concerns your friends—you know, make sure the MRD behaves itself, all that. But that's just it, I have to *justify* it. Can't play the 'old friends' card, it doesn't fly." Sentinel smirked. "I need some gesture of trust, so I can at least be sure you won't turn on me the second you get the chance. You know how politics are."

"I don't understand."

Sentinel stepped back. "Come on, Optimus, lend a servo. Until then, I gotta err on the side of caution."



A gesture of trust.

A chill crept up Optimus's spinal strut. "Support you politically, you mean."

Sentinel shrugged, looked as if he were not trying to smile more. "I'd never compromise your beliefs, Optimus. Just anything, so I can argue in good faith that you are a staunch supporter."

*He's lying. The Council has nothing to do with this.*

He'd seen Sentinel lie a thousand times, and those little tells were there now, the too-sincere smile, the steady wide-opticked gaze.

If the Council had nothing to do with this, it meant the sufficiency of this 'gesture of trust' was entirely up to Sentinel's judgement.

What would be enough?

Optimus had little to give. The political movement had hardly gotten out of Ratchet's apartment, let alone off the ground. Other than that, he was in disgrace. There was nothing he could give.

The thought slipped into his processor like an import, cold and alien. No. There was something he could give Sentinel, something Sentinel wouldn't toss aside because he wanted it so much, *had* wanted it so much.

Optimus clenched his servos to keep them from shaking. Sentinel had done all this because of him. Frightened Sari. Threatened Omega. Sari at least was out of his reach but Omega already lived in danger of being offlined or dissected. Sentinel held his spark in the center of his servo—and Sari was small and easily disappeared, and all the distance to Earth wouldn't help her if she decided to visit again...

Elita had been right not to return.

Optimus's tanks lurched. He looked down, steeled himself. Reached out and put a servo on Sentinel's forearm. Somehow managed something like a smile.

When Sentinel met his optics, he almost recoiled at the sheer smug satisfaction on his faceplates, at the realization.

Sentinel had never intended anything else. Sentinel had planned this, had planned to give Optimus this one way out, and this one way only. Optimus almost lifted his hand and fled the room, but that would mean Omega and Sari's lives instead of his frame, so he forced his servo steady and smiled into Sentinel's hateful face.

He had to do it. He had no choice. It was him or Sari and Omega, and the thought of facing Ratchet if something happened to Omega—

"Just like old times," he managed.

Sentinel moved in close and wrapped an arm around his waist. "I knew I could rely on you, Optimus old buddy. I've got a few hours free. Why don't we catch up a bit?"

---

He arrived home while Ratchet was still back at the hospital. He crossed the main room and closed himself in the washracks.

He kept moving, scrubbed himself, kept moving because the moment he stopped he'd have to think. He dried off, he paced the room, reshuffled things, did the washing and checked the energon stores and the supplements, cleaned, polished—any little chore that would keep him in motion and not thinking.

The lock mechanism chirped.

Optimus put what he'd been holding down and fled the room, only stopped when he reached his own quarters and the door was closed behind him.

He couldn't face Ratchet now. The idea of talking, of acting as if nothing had happened, was unimaginable, and he could not, could not tell Ratchet what had happened, what he had done, how he had no better resources than his own frame. How he would whore himself out to another mech, that he was so very weak as to need to.

*I'm no Prime*, he thought, and covered his faceplates with his servos, sliding down with his back to the door. *All of you are wrong. I'm no hero. I'm weak and immoral and pathetic. I told him yes. He wanted me to do that, and I shouldn't have said yes but I did and I will again because I can't do anything else.*

His tanks lurched, though there was little but fumes left now. The leaden weight in his spark, present since the Council had made the decision to displace him, grew unbearably, and his servos clawed over his faceplate, clutched his audial finals. The pain of those sensitive receptors came as a relief and he pinched again. It was what he deserved. He curled tight around himself. Part of him wanted to be held, comforted, but the rest of him flinched from the memory of servos running over him, digits pressing into joints and seams.

A dry burst of static tore its way out of him, and he clamped his intake shut, hoping that Ratchet hadn't heard. He didn't want to—*couldn't*—explain.

Was this all he was? A pleasure-bot? Could he do no more than open his panels and pray that it was enough to buy Omega and Sari's safety?

He should be able to do more, to defend them with his frame rather than his surrender. He wanted to fight, to do something, but the reasonable part of his processor reminded him that he could not. Sentinel had power.

Sentinel would ask again, he knew that, Sentinel would ask again and there was nothing he could do.

"I can't do this," he whispered, and rocked. "I can't do this, not again..."

*But you will*, he thought, and hated himself for it. *You will, because you're too weak to even run away. You've never been strong enough to do that.*

*To where? Where could I go? Where could we go? We can't hide forever.*

*You only think that because you're a coward. You're looking for excuses.*

A knock sounded on the door. He bolted upright. His audial fins stung, and with a brief moment of panic he wondered if he had visibly injured them and what he could say to Ratchet.

"Hey kid," said Ratchet. "Brought some of those flavoring mixes you like so much."

"Thank you," he managed.

“Can’t see how they don’t make *you* backfire,” said Ratchet, voice already fading. “Young bots...”

Optimus relaxed.

“Oh, kid, one other thing,” said Ratchet. “We’ll have company next joor. Couple people want to talk politics with you. Can tell them to go away if you don’t want to.”

“Certainly,” said Optimus, not really hearing himself. “Certainly, thank you.” He could feel the mask return, the one he’d worn all through the long months after Elita offlined, during the trial, during the subsequent humiliations and betrayals.

It was almost easy.

## Chapter 12

Optimus really had a gift with managing crowds.

Ratchet watched him above the helms of the group clustered in the square and folded his servos, smirking. Successful indeed. A lot of people were discontent. Closing down the pubs did that to mecha.

And Optimus was encouraging, a vent of fresh air in a cloud of exhaust. Here he was, talking earnestly about military reform and more refined civil government, and people were pausing to listen, and by the flickers of optics to high-overhead newscreens, comparing him to Sentinel.

If the number of people who stayed to listen was any indication, Sentinel suffered considerably in the comparison.

“Knew I’d find you here,” said Jazz, next to him.

“Here in a professional capacity to break up the subversive gathering?” said Ratchet out of the corner of his intake.

“No. Explicitly not, in fact. Sentinel’s orders,” said Jazz.

“Huh.”

“He said to let Optimus have his fun. Any idea what that means?”

“As if I speak to Sentinel. You know, I was expecting more trouble from you and yours.”

“Yeah, I was expecting to give you more trouble. But Sentinel gave orders.”

Ratchet stared sidelong at Jazz. He smelled a rodent.

“Don’t look at me, he doesn’t tell me anyth—frag. Is that the Camienan Ambassador and her bodyguard?”

“Who?”

“There, the two femmes. Big blue one and the flightframe—*frag* it is them that’s not good...”

Ratchet spotted the two in the crowd. “Oh, those two? They’re coming toward us.”

“They saw me,” said Jazz. “Frag, that’s going to send the Council into *fits*—A good joor to you, Ambassador Windblade.”

“And to you,” said the Ambassador. Her gaze flicked to Ratchet, who inclined his helm.

“Ratchet, a medic attached to the Iacon Military Hospital,” said Jazz. “Ratchet, Ambassador Windblade of Caminus. Ambassador, I did not expect to see you here.”

“It was Chromia’s idea,” said Windblade, gesturing to the blue femme, presumably her bodyguard. “She suggested we become more familiar with other aspects of Autobot culture.”

“Particularly the freedom inherent in the political process,” said Chromia, smiling. Ratchet had to suppress a grin of his own. He liked her already.

“Of course,” said Jazz, and if he was taken aback he hid it well.

They stood in awkward silence. Chromia turned her attention back to Optimus and his speech.

There was a general shift of frames as Optimus concluded and descended from the platform, moving through the crowd and talking to them. With a polite comment, Windblade and Chromia took their leave.

Jazz let out a long ventilation, patted Ratchet on the shoulder, and also vanished.

Ratchet huffed to himself, folded his servos and waited for Optimus.

---

The movement grew quickly, gained a name--the Autobot Freedom Faction.

They even found someone willing to post Optimus’s speeches on the datanet. The actual newschannels began talking about them--and not all negatively, either, which shocked everyone.

Not a word from Sentinel. No condemnations. No orders to cease and desist. No enforcers breaking up gatherings.

Nothing.

Sentinel may have been silent and made no overt statement of condemnation, but Jazz was not so circumspect.

“Sentinel’s digging himself a hole,” he said. “Look, Ratchet, it’s not like I particularly support him, but you’re undermining Autobot High Command here. Our government. I don’t know what you think you’re playing at, but there are still Decepticons out there. Oh sure, the famous ones are imprisoned, but that doesn’t mean the dangerous ones are. We can’t split power right now. We can’t afford to.”

He paused, still standing on the threshold of the apartment. “I’m going to have to put your movement down sooner or later, Ratchet. The bigger it is, the uglier that’s going to be. It’s gonna be orders. I won’t want to do it, but--”

“It’ll be the right thing, is that what you’re saying?”

Jazz nodded. “What the Freedom Faction is doing is all but inviting the Decepticons to come back and conquer Cybertron. If that happens...” He paused. “You know what they’ll do. And if that happens, everything we’ve done--everything *Prowl* did--won’t matter.” He met Ratchet’s optics. “I’m sorry, Doc. It’s the only right thing to do.”

With that, he left Ratchet standing in the doorway, a protest on his glossa.

*Thought you were smarter than that, kid*, he thought, pushing back anger. Oh, he understood Jazz too well. Didn’t make the kid any less wrong, or any less of a fool, or a threat.

With a deep ex-vent, he went back to work.

There had to be a way to undo the work of Pharma and his team.

---

He was poring over a report late into the night cycle when Optimus slunk in, looking guilty as frag and with an air of general misery more acute than he'd had since the end of the trial. Add to that a few scuffs and blue paint transfers, and it didn't take a genius to figure out where he'd been.

Optimus noticed him and froze. "Ah," he said, voice hoarse, reset his vocalizer and said, "You're online late."

Ratchet reached for his oil and took a sip. "So are you," he said.

Optimus winced. Frag, not the response he was going for. He put the datapad down and looked at Optimus. "Need to talk, kid?"

Optimus hesitated.

Ratchet pushed out the seat across from him with a stabilizer. "Or just sit for a bit."

Optimus sat. And put his helm in his hands. "They're right," he said after a moment. "I'm not fit to lead."

"Shuttlescrap." Ratchet folded his arms. "You defeated Megatron and saved a planet. You're a brilliant leader—"

"I am not," said Optimus. "If I can't even make good decisions where I am concerned—"

"I'm assuming this is about Sentinel," said Ratchet, and carefully did not smile as Optimus's optics went wide.

"How did you know?"

"Because he's the only one who can send you into these fits so easily," said Ratchet.

Optimus looked at him a long moment, then ex-vented heavily and put his helm in his servos.

"You know he's a complete dipstick, right?" The flippant comment was exactly what he needed to cover his anxiety. *Has he decided to move against us?*

A snort. Then, nearly inaudibly, "Then why can't I keep out of his berth?"

Ratchet was pretty sure Optimus hadn't meant to say that out loud but answered anyway. "Habit is a powerful thing."

"I got out of that habit on Earth," said Optimus in that same near-whisper.

Ratchet, this time, said nothing. Things fell into place. Of course Sentinel was too much of a self-centered aft to arrest someone he was fragging.

Optimus stayed where he was, not moving. Ratchet noted that there wasn't even a whiff of ozone from him—he certainly hadn't overloaded. Poor kid. Maybe some kind spark might give Sentinel a good shove into a smelting pit and end a lot of trouble right then and there.

"I'm just worried," said Optimus. "About Omega and Sari. The Council doesn't like them. If

Sentinel has a grudge against me...”

Ratchet’s spark froze and his tanks lurched. He took his servos off the table so Optimus couldn’t see him clench them so hard they trembled.

“I shouldn’t suspect him of—of abusing his position but he can be so, so petty...” Still just on the cusp of hearing, and Optimus wasn’t looking at him, just at the table.

“Optimus,” said Ratchet, and Optimus hunched himself smaller. “Optimus, look at me.”

Blue optics slowly rose to meet his.

“Sentinel will never be able to coerce you into his berth again,” he said. “I will make sure of it.”

Optimus looked away again. “You must think I’m a fool,” he said.

“You’re not a fool,” said Ratchet. “You’re the furthest thing from it. Power down, Optimus; you need it.”

“And what exactly are you planning to do?”

“Nothing you want to know about.”

A deeply suspicious look; Ratchet schooled his faceplate into as close an approximation of innocence as he was capable of and looked back at him.

“Just...don’t do anything stupid, all right?”

“Oh no,” lied Ratchet. “Furthest thing from my processor.”

---

Ratchet set up the encryptions and reroutings and proxies with the ease of long practice, and then leaned back in the seat and waited for the call to be picked up.

And hoped like slag she hadn’t changed her frequencies for the last few centuries.

*“What the slag is this about and how did you get this frequency?”* A pause. *“Autobot.”*

“Good to hear you too, Strika,” said Ratchet, keeping his tone neutral.

A very exasperated ex-vent. *“I promised to offline you if you contacted me again. Unless you intended to join my forces.”*

“Actually, I do.” Ratchet grinned at the angry spurt of static from the line. “Along with a few others, of course.”

*“It is too slagging early for this scrap,”* growled Strika. *“What do you want from me, medic?”*

“Official Decepticon recognition of the Autobot Freedom Faction,” said Ratchet, still grinning.

“Possibly asylum. A jailbreak. Helping the next Prime sort out his relationship issues. A Lord Protector. Oh, and assistance in a change in government.”

*“Frag you, you doddering scrappile.”* The screen flicked on to reveal a very tired Strika, one servo around a container of midgrade. *“Now give me context—and keep in processor that the only reason*

*I'm listening is because you mentioned a jailbreak."*



## Act II

### Act Two

*You know they will win  
and then they'll come in  
there's nothing you can say can lead them astray.*

...

*But the storm is a comin' cross the hills tonight  
like a vein full of rain to the hearts that should fight!*

--[Katzenjammer, A Bar in Amsterdam.](#)

Optimus wondered how long it would take for Alpha Trion to notice that he no longer came into the archives.

It seemed these days like his whole function was buying off Sentinel with one servo, and writing speeches about liberty with the other. He felt a complete hypocrite.

And Sentinel made it clear the very existence of the Autobot Freedom Faction was something Optimus only had because Sentinel gave him permission. He'd laughed, and said, "Since when are you a good enough leader to worry *me*?" and sent Optimus away with that niggling at his processor all day. He was leading a movement and fragging its worst enemy at the same time, and he was a fool and a hypocrite.

*But I don't want Sentinel*, he'd think, and then at the heels of that thought would come, *If you meant that you would have run away*, and he'd sink back into the shame.

Ratchet had exploded in rage when he found out about Sentinel. At least he hadn't exploded at Optimus, which had been far better than he'd been expecting. Even if it made his plating crawl, he was still saying yes.

*I don't want him, I don't want to say yes, I have no other options--*

*You do. You could run away. Now, with Omega and Ratchet and Arcee and all the others.*

*I can't do that. What about the others?*

Because there were others, hundreds of thousands of others. It would have been heartening, wonderful--if he weren't betraying them with every ventilation he took.

Ratchet had said he was going to help.

It had been a week--he'd found himself reverting back to Earth time more and more, and had no idea why--since then, and nothing had happened. Doubtless Ratchet meant well, but of course he had to have realized by now it was useless. Sentinel was too powerful, and Optimus too foolish.

Thank Primus Ratchet hadn't said anything about it since. Optimus wasn't sure if he could have tolerated it otherwise. Bad enough Ratchet had found out in the first place. If the only other option hadn't been moving back into the barracks, he would have left.

He arrived back from an errand run, juggling containers of oil, polish, and supplements, and found Ratchet speaking with Arcee in the main room. They both looked up at him, and their expressions made him want to turn around and flee. He put the bags down hastily on the floor, nodded at them, and started toward his room.

"Optimus," said Arcee. He hesitated, didn't want to turn, didn't want to look at her. In the spark of him, he was enraged, betrayed--how *could* Ratchet do such a thing? He'd *trusted* him.

"I'm taking Omega to Earth," said Arcee. "To collect Sari. She just got out of school for the year, and would like to see more of the galaxy."

Sari and Omega, off where no one could find them. Optimus looked over his shoulder at Arcee.

"I thought you might want to know," she said.

He was still angry, so very angry, but there was relief now too. Sari and Omega out of Sentinel's reach--

He stayed like that for one vent, two, then turned away and hastened into his room, shaking.

---

"We could have managed that better," said Ratchet.

"I suppose," said Arcee. She leaned forward. "Seemed he assumed I knew more rather than less. You're not going to tell me why--"

"No," said Ratchet. "Kid deserves privacy. Just get Omega and Sari somewhere the Elite Guard won't come looking."

Arcee looked at him. "You're worried they're going to try the same thing they did on Lugnut."

"Yes," said Ratchet. He put his face in his servos. "Frag, Arcee, I don't know. What the *frag* did we fight for? Because it certainly wasn't *this*."

Arcee reached out and put a hand on his shoulder. "Because we didn't want innocent species eradicated to glean a temporary resource, no matter how vital it was. Because we believed our species was better than that, and there was another solution. Oh, and because Megatron is a slaghead."

Ratchet snorted.

"We did the right thing," said Arcee. "After everything, I still believe that. I also believe that the current government should get its aft paddled to Earth and back, but that's just me. We're Autobots, Ratchet. We support the Cause when it's right, and *set* it right when it's wrong. That's what loyalty means to us."

"Yes, but how?" said Ratchet.

"However we can." Arcee smiled a little. "Within reason, of course. We're not Decepticons."

Ratchet's conscience winced at that. He kept his face still. "Thank you," he said. "Good luck."

“Thank you,” said Arcee. “Don’t do anything too stupid while I’m gone.”

“Why do you think I’d do something stupid?” asked Ratchet. “*Everyone* seems to be saying that to me these days. Name the last thing I did that was stupid.”

“Alphabetical or chronological?” Arcee grinned at him. “Take care of yourself, Ratchet. Don’t risk yourself. Unless it’s to kick Shockwave in the interface paneling. Then go ahead.”

Ratchet felt like a truly terrible person. “I will keep that in processor.”

He let out a long ventilation when the door slid shut behind her, then busied himself putting the shopping away. His conscience pinged him again. Not just over Arcee.

He pulled down a cube and poked through the supplements until he found the ones Optimus favored, combined them carefully—an explosion in the kitchen was not the kind of apology he intended—then carried the whole thing to Optimus’s room. “Optimus?”

A long pause. “What is it?”

“I just wanted to say that I only told Arcee about MRD’s interest. Nothing more.”

The door opened. Optimus looked down at him, plainly unconvinced.

“Patient confidentiality,” said Ratchet. “I don’t intend to break my oaths, kid. You should refuel.”

Optimus reached out, accepted the cube. “Thanks,” he said, and just stood there.

“The movement can manage fine, even if they cracked down on it,” said Ratchet. “If there are more threats, please, tell me. I’ll make sure he can’t follow through.”

“How?” said Optimus. “I mean, you’re a doctor. A doctor for a spacebridge repair team.”

“I made enemies,” said Ratchet. “But I still have favors I can use. It’s all right, Optimus. We’ll be safe.”

Optimus frowned at him.

“I’ll go make one for myself,” said Ratchet. “You’re welcome to come and join.”

Optimus made a noncommittal noise and didn’t follow him. He didn’t close the door, either, which was promising.

When Ratchet looked up again, Optimus sat on the couch, sipping at the energon.

Good enough. He resisted the urge to smirk.

Sentinel could sit on a missile and rotate. They were going to *win*.

## Chapter 14

The knock came in the middle of the night cycle. Ratchet jerked upright from his study of Lugnut's files, but before he could open the door it blasted inward. A high beam caught him in the optics; he flung up a hand to protect them. *Oh slag. They traced the signal.*

Blue visor, helm bill, a narrow grim face. Jazz. "Cover him." The voice was colder than Jazz ever was. "I have a warrant for the arrest of one Optimus Prime. Where is he?"

Cold horror washed through Ratchet's systems. "There's been a misunderstanding," he said. "You don't want him—Jazz, wait a second."

Jazz gestured to the mecha with him. They went to search the hallway.

"Jazz, it's not him it's—"

Jazz placed the muzzle of the blaster on Ratchet's chest and leaned in. To an observer, it would look like he was scaring a mouthy prisoner into silence. "Believe me, Ratchet, you don't wanna take the fall for this one," he said. "I don't have to arrest you for something I didn't hear."

"But it's not him, you can't do this—"

"I warned you I'd have to," said Jazz. "Orders of Magnus and the Council."

"Dammit, Jazz—"

"Mute it," snapped Jazz. "Frag's sake, Ratchet, I don't want to arrest *both* of you!"

"Oh yeah?" said Ratchet, glaring at him. "Play toady if you want, but you don't get to salve your conscience like that. You're gonna have to arrest me, and here's why—"

Jazz slapped a mouth clamp on him.

Ratchet stared at him in complete shock, then tried comms.

Those were down.

*Oh you little—!*

They dragged Optimus out into the room, optics shuttering and half in recharge, frame locked by stasis cuffs. Jazz turned away from Ratchet and went to him.

"Optimus Prime. You are under arrest."

Optimus's optics flicked to Ratchet, whose spark twisted. "What are the charges?"

"Espionage," said Jazz.

"On what basis?"

Jazz hesitated, then, "You contacted a Decepticon warship last night cycle. We traced the signal back to this dwelling."

"I did no such thing."

“Sentence has already been passed. Emergency session of the Council. You will not be permitted an appeal.”

That was blatantly illegal, would have been even during the war. Ratchet would have bared his dentae and cursed at Jazz if he could have. He looked properly contrite, but what he was doing was still utterly wrong.

*You could always defy them, he thought, glaring. You know he's not guilty, you miserable slagger.*

Optimus's optics fixed on him, wide, questioning. Ratchet wanted to curl over himself with guilt, but he met Optimus's gaze steadily, and nodded.

Optimus's optics went still wider. Then he looked away.

He did not look back at Ratchet again.

“I'll do a final sweep,” said Jazz. “Proceed; I'll catch up later.”

“Yes sir.”

He waited until the last of his people filtered out, were well gone before turning to Ratchet.

“If you're wondering why you're not under arrest,” he said, “Thank Pharma. He told me he needed your assistance on a current project, and MRD backed him up. But don't ever do something that stupid again, Ratchet. They won't cover your aft forever.” He reached down and freed the mouth clamp with a jerk. “Never figured you for a double dealer. Prowl trusted you; guess he was wrong.”

With that, he left.

Ratchet did the best he could to prop the doors up against their mounting, and settled back on the couch, pinching his nasal guard.

Pharma wanted him on a project.

Likely this project.

He let out a long, long ventilation. *Don't ever do something that slagging stupid again.*

He ignored the guilt, the memory of Arcee's processor splayed open, the revulsion on Jazz's faceplate.

“That slagging stupid,” he said aloud to himself. “*Watch me.*”

He wished he felt as dedicated as he sounded.

## Chapter 15

“Alpha Trion?”

Alpha Trion looked down at Ratchet. An optic ridge arched. “Yes?”

“I need assistance. Is there anywhere I can send a sensitive message?”

Alpha Trion shuttered his optics. “An odd request. I was expecting it from Optimus.”

“He was arrested.”

“Oh. I assume you don’t want the signal traced?”

“No.”

“Good. This way.”

Ratchet followed, servos clenched. If Alpha Trion betrayed him, it was over. The movement, any hope Optimus had at freedom, everything.

But there was nothing else he could do.

“In here,” said Alpha Trion, gesturing at a private workstation in a soundproof room. “It’s capable of considerable long-distance transmission. There will be no record of said transmission, and the content will be encrypted heavily.”

“Thank you,” said Ratchet.

“Anything necessary to aid Optimus or one of his people,” said Alpha Trion, and paused before the doors whooshed open again. “Oh, if you’re contacting Strika, remind her she still owes me a cube.”

Ratchet turned to stare over his shoulder at him.

“It may have been nine million years, but *I* remember where we were in that game,” said Alpha Trion. “Starting a war is no excuse.”

Strika, to her credit, laughed. “Tell him to make Cybertron accessible to Decepticons and he might see his cube one day.”

She sobered immediately when Optimus’s arrest was mentioned. “Frag. That makes the situation considerably more urgent. We cannot let them crush the AFF before we arrive; we need that support. To minimize risk to you, I have a contact on Cybertron. Meet her at these coordinates at this time.” She showed him a datapad; Ratchet memorized place and time, then nodded. “She has a secure channel to me to be used in emergencies. Anything else?”

“I’m assigned to MRD. The bulk of its operations are in the prison.”

“Good. Do not put yourself at risk. Your job is information, no more.” Her optics narrowed in what was as close as she could get to a grin. “You’ll earn your brands yet, Doctor.”

“I don’t want to,” said Ratchet, stung. “I’m an Autobot.”

Strika just looked at him.

“I’m setting our Cause right,” said Ratchet, and killed the feed.

The time was not for another two days. Ratchet suffered through them somehow without ripping anyone’s spark out, which was a sore test indeed with Pharma.

“Now if you examine this region very carefully,” Pharma said, gesturing at a diagram of Shockwave’s processor, “you’ll see where I plan to deploy one of my own inventions.”

Ratchet looked at him and fantasized about ripping his wings off. The sadistic glitch was *enjoying* this, enjoying using his art to destroy other living beings. *I shall make no change not in service to this aim; I shall consider those under my care cadre and never do knowing wrong unto them*, he thought, and wished he could somehow drop it on repeat on Pharma’s audio processing circuits.

“Have anything to add, Ratchet?” said Pharma, and tilted a condescending smile at him, his wings hiked up and proud. The wings were new. Pharma had upgraded himself as soon as the experiment with Jetfire and Jetstorm proved successful. He said it was simply to make sure he was well equipped to tend patients on the field. Anyone who knew him knew it was because he couldn’t resist the opportunity to have one more thing to lord over everyone else.

“No,” said Ratchet.

Pharma smirked. “They’ve already scheduled the procedure, so participation would be appreciated.”

*Oh no you won’t*, thought Ratchet. *I will not break my oaths because you were condescending at me.*

“My specialty is in repairing damage,” he said. “I thought I was here to help if something went wrong. Otherwise, I’d better defer to your judgement.” *There, you have something to self-service to, you preening scraplet. Don’t think you’re ever going to hear it again.*

“What’s this, Ratchet? Admitting I’m better at something than you?”

“Yes,” said Ratchet. *When it comes to breaking oaths and torturing prisoners, certainly.*

Pharma stared at him, still grinning.

“I was a field medic,” said Ratchet. “That’s where my skills lie. Can we get back to the actual procedure? What do you plan to use to prevent fatal shock?”

Nothing, apparently, if the way Pharma bristled was any indication. Ratchet settled back in his seat and glanced down at the badge on his chest.

For a fleeting moment, he wondered whether he might want that brand after all.

---

There was no darkness, or silence. Optimus huddled against the wall of his small bright cell and wished he could offline his audials. Screams would have been easier to bear. Instead, there were little sounds, a constant chorus, sobs and coughs and moans and whimpers. Somewhere, someone raved, a low constant litany.

The cell was too small to transform in, too small to stand comfortably, and he had to recharge huddled up. His backstrut ached with it, his tanks grumbled with the subpar fuel, and a cold seeped

into every joint of his frame.

He'd seen Shockwave dragged past, still and drugged, and heard the chatter of the MRD bots assigned to his case. Once, he'd thought he'd seen Ratchet, but was unsure.

He'd only had one brief visit, a small bot who had stared at him for some time, muttered about therapy, and moved to the next cell. The rest of the time, he was alone, aware of the other prisoners but unable to communicate with them.

Indefinite imprisonment. No limit on the time. He could be here for the rest of his function. Likely enough, he would be.

And because of Ratchet.

Ratchet who had betrayed them to the Decepticons. He'd wondered if it was a trumped-up charge but the look on Ratchet's faceplate, that little nod, said otherwise, and that anger and betrayal was worse than anything else.

How could he?

He'd seen what Megatron had done to Omega Supreme, to Arcee, what he'd wanted to do to Earth, and now he was turning traitor? How could he?

Maybe the Autobots weren't so bad after all. It seemed like the only alternative was the Decepticons.

How long had Ratchet been working with them? Had this whole political campaign been something Ratchet orchestrated for the benefits of the Decepticons? Had he used Optimus to that end?

The idea that he might have been a Decepticon tool, however unwittingly, made his spark hurt. He lay down, curled up, and waited to recharge.

Everything had been in vain.

There was no one he could rely on. Perhaps it was better that he remain here, where that would no longer be an issue.



## Chapter 16

Ratchet arrived to the coordinates early.

So did his contact.

Ratchet very carefully kept the surprise off his faceplate and accompanied her to what she assured him was a secure location, and only then allowed himself a good look at her.

“Aren’t you the Caminan Ambassador’s bodyguard?”

“Yes.”

“Isn’t this a little counterproductive?”

“Quite the opposite. I’m protecting her by making sure we never actually need to negotiate with Sentinel. He’s been staring at her paneling since our first meeting.”

“Oh. You two are—”

“Amica Endura. He’s trouble and I don’t want him anywhere near her. He’s just the sort that won’t take rejection well.”

“You’re right on that,” said Ratchet. “Does she know?”

“No. Too honest.”

“Mmm. Chromia, right?”

“Yes. Herself said you had information.”

“Yes. Here are the maps. I have security clearance. Anything else?”

“Groundbridge codes?”

“We’ll need someone military for that,” said Ratchet. “Fortunately, I know a mech, and he’s overdue for his oil change.”

Chromia eyed him. “You know Herself needs a medic. Apparently the last one got himself slagged in a definitely terminal manner.”

“Oh? And what do you care?”

“My other amica endura is on that ship,” she said, and looked away.

“You’re a Decepticon?”

“No. I’m Caminan and I need to get my ambassador home online and in one piece.” She glared at him.

“You sounded as if you were trying to convert me.”

“What, you’re not already—”

Ratchet tapped his badge. “This isn’t just cover.”

There was a pause.

“Is that all?”

“Yes.” Ratchet turned away. “Chromia, a word of advice.”

“Yes?”

“Tell her. Better you, now, than after everything goes to Pit. Believe me.”

The look she gave him over her shoulder was one of sincere dislike.

---

Things progressed at a pace that made Ratchet want to scream with frustration. He did, late at night when there was no one to hear him, shouted and kicked the furniture. One major problem was Bumblebee, who was refusing his oil change with his usual tenacity.

Ratchet didn’t have the time for his usual tenacity. “Bumblebee, if you put this off again, I will report you as unfit for duty!” he roared at last.

Bumblebee looked startled. “You all right, Doc?”

“If you’ve been paying attention to the newsfeeds? You’ll see why. Get your aft over here, *now*.”

“Fine. Fine. Just guilt me, why don’t you. Heading over. I’ll tell them about how you threatened me.”

“If they saw your medical charts they’d agree,” said Ratchet.

“FINE. Heard you the first time.”

Ratchet settled back in the chair and cast a suspicious look up at the camera in the corner of the room. At least it wouldn’t be present in the examination room—patient confidentiality laws trumped all else—but there still might be sound recorders. This was going to be difficult.

He wondered if he could trust Bumblebee. Decided not to risk it. Bumblebee’s track record with Wasp probably meant he’d report first and ask questions later.

He would have to play this very carefully indeed. At least it meant that if things went entirely to the smelter, Bumblebee wouldn’t be implicated. The only thing he’d be guilty of was being taken in by a traitorous friend.

“Hey doc,” said Bumblebee. “I’m here. You can commence with the mad science. If I’d known you were going to get such a twist in your tailpipe—“

“You’d prefer to get this done by one of the other hacks here?” said Ratchet. “Be glad I’m not Pharma. You’d wake up with your t-cog gone and sold on the black market.”

“Woow,” said Bumblebee, drawing the word out. “Difficult work environment, huh?”

“Don’t test me, kid,” said Ratchet. “First rule of warfare: never torque off the medic.”

Bumblebee stared at him for several minutes. “Sorry about Optimus.”

“Not here, kid,” said Ratchet. “Come on.”

Only when the exam room door shut did he speak again. “Optimus was framed.”

“Look,” said Bumblebee, edging away from the slab, “I know it’s easier to believe that. I know it’s hard to believe that Optimus *Prime* would do something like that. But you can’t really argue with the evidence, Ratchet! They tracked that signal back to your place! That’s not the kind of thing you can fake.”

“Yes, it is,” said Ratchet. “I know it, because I was sitting right across the fragging *table* from Optimus when he was supposed to have made that call. Someone set this up. Get on the slab. Don’t think I don’t see you slinking away.”

“Look, if you just wanted to chat, why even bother with the oil change?”

“Because you need an oil change and friends do nice things for each other.”

“Since when do you have friends?” Ratchet turned to glare at him, and Bumblebee raised his servos. “I kid, I kid. Look, I’m getting on the slab.”

“Why the fuss?” asked Ratchet. “It’s not as if it hurts.”

“I just don’t like getting prodded,” said Bumblebee. “So Optimus was framed. Why?”

“You ever noticed that people don’t tend to like him?”

“He’s got a crankshaft so far up his aft he can taste oil. Yeah, duh, people don’t like him.”

“*Important* people,” said Ratchet. “Like the Council. Like Sentinel. Ever noticed that?”

“Um, yeah.”

“I think one of them wants him gone,” said Ratchet. “And I want to nail whoever it is to the wall.”

“Good idea,” said Bumblebee. “Just don’t nail *me* to the wall with that.” Ratchet realized he’d been advancing with the new filter upraised in menacing fashion. He lowered it and sighed.

“They have me working with MRD,” he said.

“Good for you. That’s a cushy gig.”

“No. It’s not. What they’re doing is wrong, and I think they might use Optimus as a subject.” Ratchet looked at Bumblebee. “We have to get Optimus out before that. We have to prove him innocent.”

“What kind of experiment?” said Bumblebee, cocking his helm, optics narrowed.

“Processor stuff,” said Ratchet. “Mind control. In case the Decepticons come back.”

“Oh frag,” said Bumblebee.

“Yeah. You see why I’m nervous, kid? Lie back, would you?”

“You think they’re gonna go all Headmaster on Optimus?”

“Yes. But with what they have, it’s not possible to undo it. He’ll be gone forever.”

“No one deserves that,” said Bumblebee. “Okay, Doc, what’s the plan—ow! Your servo’s cold!”

“You don’t have to do anything,” said Ratchet, and did *not* smirk at the victory. “I just need groundbridge coordinates.”

---

They urged Optimus out of his cell and onto a gurney late one night cycle. He didn’t fight them. They were Autobots, after all, and if they were rough, it was because they thought he was a traitor.

One administered a drug of some sort, and he fell into a daze. There was anxiety there, a sense of menace with no real cause, but his processor would not hold any thought for long, and he could not focus on the unease. Things drifted, were disconnected, and he could not move even if they’d removed the restraints.

Instead, he shuttered his optics and fell into a light standby, rousing again when they jolted him upright onto an examination slab.

There was an Autobot medic there, a flightframe. He reminded Optimus of Ratchet, and a fleeting stab of rage at his friend’s betrayal jolted through the drugged haze. He heard words, distant and frightening, but could not process the full sentence.

*Orders, and similar enough? and dispose of, and promising candidate.*

They put him in some kind of scanner, and seemed pleased. Optimus’s confused unease grew.

“Yes,” said the flightframe medic at last, and this time Optimus understood him, the haze beginning to clear. “Tell the Magnus the procedure will be easily conducted on the original schedule.”

## Chapter 17

“We should have left half an orn ago,” said Chromia. She glared at the container of liquid in front of her—more general irritation than any reflection on the quality of oil Ratchet could afford—and huffed a long ventilation. “But no, they keep delaying transport because of security requirements on the border! I would bet my t-cog the scraplet-fragger doesn’t plan to let us leave until we agree to his leak-poor treaty. Treaty! More like a statement of conquest! The trade agreement would beggar us further.”

“Sounds like Sentinel.” Ratchet stared glumly into his own oil. “We have less than an orn before the surgery goes forward. I think Shockwave’s a dipstick—”

“But even he doesn’t deserve that,” said Chromia, and tossed her oil back. “You’ve said. I’m just worried the Magnus will try to arrest Windblade if this goes any further.”

“Given the way he operates, you’re the more likely target. He’ll use you to guilt her into compliance.”

Chromia stared at him. “How do you know?”

“He’s done the same to a friend of mine.”

“She knows her duty. She wouldn’t—”

“She might.”

Chromia let out a long ex-vent and stared into the depths of her container. “Ever wonder if we give each other too much information?”

Ratchet snorted. “If one of us is captured, they’ll know Strika’s on her way. That hasn’t changed one bit, and everything else pales in comparison.”

“Hmph,” said Chromia. “Good oil. Nothing like it back home.”

“What is Caminus like, anyway?”

“Hard,” said Chromia. “It’s not exactly a thriving metropolis, but after this?” Her gesture took in the room, the situation, Sentinel’s general objectionable nature. “It’s *safe*. I just want to get her home safe, that’s *it*. It’s home, it’s not much, and living there is hard. But it’s better than this.”

“And this trade treaty—”

“What Sentinel wants we simply don’t have,” said Chromia. “He *knows* it. I can just see it ticking away in that vicious processor of his. He’ll force us into this treaty, and when he’s beggared us, he’ll come in to help—but the price will be our freedom. We’ll become a colony. Windblade agrees. She wants to get out of here.”

“Have you told her?”

“No. Not now.”

“You’ll want to tell her.”

“Frag that. She’s watched all the time. I only talk with you because you’re good at keeping things

quiet. Diplomatic immunity doesn't matter a rusted fuel tank to anyone in the government. How can you stand to live like this?"

"It wasn't always like this," said Ratchet and looked back down. "There was something worth fighting for, once. Before the war. During the war. I don't know when it stopped existing. I remember Ultra Magnus when he seemed like a good leader, the future of Cybertron. But... in the last years, not so much. Favors for those he liked, apathy in every other situation. It was like someone was pulling his strings. Optimus looked promising. Now he's imprisoned. And Sentinel is in charge."

"The foul, conniving, little—"

"The thing is," said Ratchet, still staring at his oil, "Sentinel's not that smart. Believe me. You see him making decisions on his own, he's slag at it. He's a hopeless leader. The question is, who wants him in power? He almost lost it last time I was here. Almost blew up the planet." He looked up at Chromia. "He's not authorized to know about what MRD's doing. There's a bigger rat in here somewhere."

"A rat?" Chromia folded her servos in front of her. "What's a rat?"

"An organic organism prone to cause trouble. It's a figure of speech, from Earth. There's a big rat here, and it's not Sentinel. Whoever it is is probably *using* Sentinel, which isn't that hard. You give Sentinel a few petty mean victories and he's a happy mech. But this one..."

"Could be the same one pulling the strings on Ultra Magnus," said Chromia.

Ratchet nodded, downed his oil. "I look forward to a nice, long chat with Strika, once she gets her sorry aft over here. Possibly even Megatron, if he's in any fit state. Things changed after we won."

"And you think it might be due to this hypothetical rat of yours."

"The king rat, if you will," said Ratchet.

Chromia grinned at him, a brief, absolutely evil expression. "Does that make you our king rat? Has a certain ring to it as a codephrase."

"No," said Ratchet, with dignity. "That would be Strika or Megatron. They're much more ratlike, and I speak as someone who has seen actual rats."

"Yes, but we're the ones organizing this whole thing."

"You are not using king rat as a codephrase for me. I refuse it. I will weld your skidplate to the wall. Besides, the term applies equally to you."

Chromia huffed and got to her stabilizers. "Too late. I think Strika will like it." She sobered. "I should be getting back. They won't believe my excuse much longer. Thank you for the oil. If you need me—"

"I have the comm frequency," said Ratchet. "Go on. Don't get yourself detained."

---

She loved this part of a campaign.

Strika looked over the half-broken holotable, optics narrowing with satisfaction. They had the codes.

They had a working shuttle—thanks to Nautica, who'd proven most cooperative after her trinemates' message about the behavior of the Autobots had come through—and a working knowledge of the base, and someone on the inside, bless that medic's conniving little spark.

No second force to slow them down. No humans to get underfoot.

Oh, it was tempting to simply conquer Cybertron while she could, but she knew she didn't have the forces. Not right now. Not without the wholesparked approval of the AFF and their assistance. No ability to wage a sustained war, not even if they took the world; the Autobots would fight madly both within and without. Eventually, numbers would tell.

If Megatron pitched a fit over that she'd make him eat the fragging data. Or frag Lugnut up against the wall of his quarters some dark cycle.

"The price of having competent officers is that they sometimes don't tell you what you want to hear, my Lord," she'd said to him once, and watched him bristle. She couldn't blame him; Starscream had made sport of it for vorns afterward. There was a good reason he wasn't fond of criticism.

She looked down at the troop figures, squinting to make them out through the cracks in the holodisplay. Nautica had declared it a hopeless case, but kept tinkering nevertheless, and at least it now *worked*, even if it made the ships look like something that belonged in the berthroom. "Inform Tarn that I will set his sorry aft on fire if he delays one more time in arrival. Lord Megatron's fate depends on his diversion. And where the frag are Sixshot and his people?"

"Just arrived, General," said Slipstream, tapping one of the ships in the display with a claw. It flashed green. "Here."

"Good. Get them deployed to hold this system in case the Autobots decide they need this bridge back." Strika paused.

"I've sent your message to Tarn," said Slipstream. "He apologizes and says that he will not be able to properly execute a traitor, and fears the effects this will have on discipline."

"Ask him if he'd prefer Overlord to have the glory of leading the charge to save Megatron," said Strika. "That should decide him."

"Are you still going to set his aft on fire?" asked Slipstream, typing.

"Yes," said Strika. "He and I need to settle the matter of command as soon as possible. He *will* take orders from me, and abandon this foolish idea that he answers to Lord Megatron alone. If I have to kick his sorry skidplate across the entire Decepticon fleet, so be it." She huffed. "There will be enough issues with him around our allies to warrant it."

"Yeeah." Slipstream scratched an audial ridge. "I was wondering how you were going to manage that, actually. It's not like any of them like Autobots very much, and Autobots tend to be kind of... small."

"With strict discipline," said Strika. "Anyone in defiance of our treaty with the AFF will be declared a traitor."

"Will Tarn go after them? He's likely to cause problems."

Strika looked at Slipstream. "Yes. How would you stop him?"

"Uh. Beat the slag out of him?"

“*Can* you beat the slag out of him?”

“Uh. No.” Slipstream looked embarrassed and angry. “Can you?”

“Yes,” said Strika. “But you’re the one handling the problem. How would you stop Tarn from causing trouble with the Autobots? Say I catch an Autobot cannonblast to the spark. You’re Megatron’s second-in-command. Tarn is going to cause problems with the allied Autobots. What would you do?”

Slipstream shifted uneasily, glared at the floor. “Get Blackout to beat the slag out of him?”

“Do you think Blackout likes you enough to take on Tarn? Do you think Tarn would take that well, or just be still more difficult because of the humiliation?”

“No, and no,” said Slipstream, glaring. “Fine. Ask Megatron to reprove Tarn.”

“Publicly or privately?”

“You said he’d be more difficult when humiliated, so privately.”

Strika slapped the surface of the holotable, making Slipstream jump. “There! You have it. Command is more than equations. You must know the people under your command, how they react to pressure from the enemy, or from you. Never give an order that you know won’t be followed. It undermines your authority. Your creator made that mistake repeatedly; you must not.”

“Yes, General,” said Slipstream. She was still angry, Strika could see that from the flicker of her optics, the slant of her wings, but she made no other sign of it. “Tarn says he’s departed and is moving toward the coordinates.”

“Good,” said Strika. “Oh, and Slipstream?”

“Yes, General?”

“You will be in command of the fleet in my absence.”

Slipstream’s optics went wide. “You think I’m ready?”

Strika snorted. “Are you questioning my judgement?”

Slipstream looked down, then at her. “Yes.”

Strika eyed her. The small Seeker was definitely smarter than her Creator, or at least intelligent enough to know that being in command would do nothing for her advancement if she fragged it up out of sheer inexperience. “Good,” she said at last. “Do your reading. You have time.”



## Chapter 18

“We’re going to move the schedule of the procedure up,” said Pharma. “I believe we are all adequately prepared.”

“I don’t,” said Ratchet, hiding the shock under a veneer of contempt. He deliberately put both stabilizers up on the chair across from him. “This is going to be useless if we don’t do it properly. We can destroy the intellect of one of the Decepticons’ greatest minds. Fine. So can an appropriately placed hammer. It’s not impressive at all. We have to be sure that we can actually change his personality, and do it effectively. We don’t have room for error.”

Pharma sneered at him. “Simply because *you’re* lagging behind...”

“The procedure you are suggesting has no room for error. If your servo misses the target by even a micrometer, you’ll damage his autonomic system irreparably and he’ll simply die on the slab. That’s why I suggested finding an alternate method where that particular procedure is concerned.”

“Well, too bad,” snapped Pharma. “My servo *won’t* miss. Unlike some bots here, I do *not* commit errors. My previous work—”

“Was clumsy and crude,” said Ratchet. “You just managed to make him repeat things. No finesse at all. Groundbreaking, but ultimately clumsy and lazy.”

Pharma drew himself up, wings quivering in affront. “I’d like to see you do better!”

“Oh, I certainly could,” said Ratchet. “By *repairing* processor damage, not creating it.”

“You don’t mean to say you’d rather be *treating* these Decepticons?” said Pharma. A very nasty grin spread across his faceplate. “Do you *sympathize* with them, Ratchet?”

All optics turned to Ratchet.

“All I can say is that I take my oaths seriously,” he said. “Paldron’s Oath, Pharma. Did you cheat your way through that like you did the rest of medical school?”

“I could have you locked up as a Decepticon sympathizer,” said Pharma.

“Would you now?” said Ratchet. “I’m sure my previous work would render that difficult, to say the least. Especially given your tendency to forget citations. I’ve read your papers, Pharma. Do you know what that will look like to the field at large? Someone trying to cover up his own *academic dishonesty* by attempting to destroy a senior authority in said field.”

Pharma froze.

Ratchet looked around the table. A lot of people avoided his optics.

“Don’t try it, Pharma,” he said. “Ruining my function isn’t worth your career.”

“Meeting dismissed,” said Pharma.

Ratchet smirked, took his stabilizers off the table, and sauntered out the door. He kept the saunter until he was safely within his own habsuite, then sat down hard and shook. Frag. He was an *idiot*. He’d let Pharma goad him into making remarks that could have gotten him imprisoned at *least*. He didn’t have the luxury of that. *They* didn’t have the luxury of that.

He wondered if it would do any good for poor Shockwave. And then shook his helm because thinking of Shockwave sympathetically didn't seem right at *all*.

They had to move, and move soon.

---

Barely an hour later, the next bad news came through, courtesy of a newsscreen above the square where he normally met Chromia.

*“Due to the recent actions of its founder and leader, Optimus—a former Prime with the Elite Guard—the Council in consultation with the Magnus announced today the official order of disbandment for the so-called Autobot Freedom Faction. As of today, the AFF is no longer a recognized Cybertronian political party, and association or affiliation with the faction constitutes at the least an infraction of civil peace statutes, and in extreme cases, treason. One member of the Council, Senator Metalhawk, recently expressed concern that the AFF may in fact be a front for Decepticon manipulation of the political process. We now join our political experts...”*

“Frag,” said Ratchet, very quietly.

“At least it wasn't unexpected,” said Chromia.

He looked up at her. “Sure, it wasn't unexpected,” he said. “But things just got a lot harder. We're gonna lose support. People'll be too scared.”

“They wouldn't have helped anyway.”

Ratchet glanced around. The square was moderately busy, a babble of voices making comprehension of anything more than a servo's length away impossible. Above them, the screen blared.

*“Filibuster, Conserve, what's your reading on the situation?”*

*“Well, Gearhead, it's pretty obvious that the leadership of the AFF has been in cahoots with the Decepticon command this whole time. We only caught them once. Anyone in the room with—or known to associate closely with—the former Optimus Prime should be under suspicion. As for everyone else... well, we're sure that some were upstanding citizens misled by Optimus's rhetoric, but there may be more than meets the eye here.”*

“That's not good,” said Chromia.

“We just ran out of time,” said Ratchet. “Go. You don't want to be seen around me.”

“No slag,” said Chromia. “I'll pass it on. Don't get arrested.”

---

She wasn't happy to see Ratchet go. Chromia huffed an exvent and turned back to the administrative buildings.

Windblade was fascinated by the history in every plate of Cybertron. Chromia was irked by it. Caminus had its own proud history. Certainly, it was shorter, but there was far less genocide. And they didn't try to suppress large parts of it, either.

It wasn't as if she liked the Decepticons much, either. Both Cybertronian factions were, when you

got right down to it, aliens. Cousins, closely related aliens, but aliens, influenced and shaped by a war like Caminus had never imagined.

*Because we weren't fragged stupid enough to,* she thought.

Windblade would grumble at her about the aliens, as usual, but Chromia couldn't find it in her to be contrite. Well. Maybe if you factored Ratchet into the equation. The old doctor seemed sensible if nothing else. Sensible and willing to call his society out for the horrors it was perpetuating.

Windblade might be fascinated by the history in every plate of Cybertron, but to Chromia, it was simply a reminder of how much *not home* she was.

*We may be small and poor, but we don't do this to our own,* she thought, as yet another newsscreen blared vitriol over her helm. *We might not have the luxuries they do*—oh and what a luxury great big newsscreens like that were—*but we treat our people right.*

Tomorrow, she'd have to go to yet another treaty meeting, and watch Sentinel make optics at Windblade, and try to herd them into an impossible agreement. If he wasn't enough reason to blow up the planet all on his own, the rest of the fawning politicians he surrounded himself with were.

And fraggit all, she missed Nautica. She knew Windblade did too, that it was hard being too far from the third member of their trine, so far that the minor sparkbond of amica endura failed to communicate. At least Nautica was likely to be safe. The Decepticons were less enamored of vicious politics than Autobots, and Caminus had little enough to offer their Cause that General Strika hadn't even offered more than a token protest when her spies found that Chromia and Windblade intended to travel on to Cybertron. They'd left Nautica to continue negotiations, too, which did a great deal toward mollifying Strika.

Decepticons, apparently, understood what it meant to be a neutral party. The Autobots—given the veiled-not-quite-threats Sentinel sprinkled heavily throughout every negotiation, their delay in departure—did not.

Windblade wasn't back from one of her meetings. Chromia sent her another ping to make sure she was all right, relaxed when the answering 'all is well' ping greeted her. The Autobots still hadn't caught on to them using that frequency; they didn't scan for it, and Chromia had spent several hours with a 'borrowed' security scanner making sure it wouldn't be inadvertently detected or blocked by standard Autobot military issue sensors or jammers. She'd taken to sending those pings every quarter-hour (*damned* if she'd ever start using Cybertronian time units!) since their departure was delayed whenever she and Windblade were separated. Not often, these days. Not more often than she could help.

She sent the transmission to Strika immediately, then headed for the door.

Only to have it sweep open in her face and Windblade stumble in, obviously pushed by one of the smirking Autobots on the other side. Chromia bared her dentae and lunged forward—

—but the door shut on emergency override, and the sound of an outside lock engaging was almost drowned out by the laughter of the guards.

She slammed her axe through the door. The twin yelps from the other side were immensely satisfying.

"What the *frag* happened?" she demanded before Windblade could start scolding her. "Are you injured?"

“No,” said Windblade, wings still raised and quivering with alarm. “No. I’m fine. But we’re under house arrest. Sentinel found out about Nautica.”

---

Late that cycle, Ratchet was alerted by a beep from his commsuite.

The message was from Pharma.

*Procedure scheduled for tomorrow.*

“Frag,” he whispered, and sent the one emergency packet he’d sworn not to send to Chromia, and hoped Intelligence wouldn’t intersect it before she had time to get it to Strika.

## Chapter 19

“Sentinel Magnus is holding us on charges of being Decepticon spies,” said Windblade, and accepted the container of fuel Chromia handed her. “His evidence is our communications with Nautica.”

Chromia felt a guilty prickle of relief. *At least it wasn't my transmissions.* “What about diplomatic immunity?”

“They’ve decided that, since we’re spies, it doesn’t apply to us anymore.” Windblade looked grim. “They’ll try us as spies before sentencing us, of course. Unless we can make a goodwill gesture that will establish this as a misunderstanding.”

“Signing the treaty.”

Windblade nodded.

“Slagsucking progeny of a—”

“It’s not an option,” said Windblade. “We can’t comply with those terms. And we can’t afford a reputation as treaty-breakers.” She gave Chromia a grim smile. “I hope you have a worst-case-scenario plan.”

“I do,” said Chromia. “You are not going to like it.”

And her commsuite chose that moment to come to angry shrieking life. Ratchet. An emergency packet. Oh frag.

She went to the hidden comm relay, downloaded the data, appended her own update on the situation, and sent it. Then she turned to look at Windblade.

Who stared at her with wide optics. “You’ve been working with Strika?”

“Not the whole time,” said Chromia. “She gave me the option of contacting them if needed. I took it. Just in case things went to Pit. Sentinel’s behavior settled it.”

Windblade frowned at her.

“It’s our way out,” said Chromia. The comm cheeped. She looked at the new message. “Strika says they’ll be here by dawn. We have to go.”

“Chromia—”

“Don’t start shouting at me. We don’t have the time. Come on.” Chromia tucked the relay away in her subspace. Probably be easier to destroy it, but wasting the materials went against every molecule of her being. Waste was a good way to get slagged.

She pulled the two small holomitters out of her subspace in the same gesture, tossed one to Windblade. “Here. Put it on.”

“What is it?”

“A disguise,” said Chromia. She eyed the hole her axe had made in the door. It was hardly even reinforced. Easy to deal with.

If the doors slid that way, that probably meant the controls were *here*...

“A sword would probably work better for that,” said Windblade softly.

“They didn’t disarm you?”

“Apparently they didn’t think I was enough of a threat.” Windblade smiled a little, activated one of her blades. “There?”

Chromia nodded. Windblade stabbed.

The door shot open. Chromia threw herself between the startled guards and Windblade, slammed the butt of the axe into one amazed jaw, kicked the other hard in the interface array, then the helm, caught Windblade by the arm and ran. “Your holoemitter!”

“Got it,” said Windblade, and flickered. Chromia activated hers as well, watched her plating turn golden and bigger as she ran.

“There’s a vent there that leads to the energon processors,” said Windblade, and Chromia slowed to see what she was pointing at.

She slowed, changed course. Going out through the energon processors would eliminate three junctions she knew to be guarded. “Right, get in.”

She boosted Windblade in, handed over her axe, and took a flying leap, heaved herself up after. They replaced the grate and crawled, Chromia wincing at the din their movements made in the confined space, and at the confined space itself. Windblade, wings flat to her back, seemed surprisingly cheerful. Cityspeakers were trained not to be concerned by small spaces, but flyers never stopped hating them.

The alarms went off, loud even muffled by the walls. They moved faster. The floor slanted down—a good sign, they were getting close to the refinery.

They slid and scrambled the last distance, fetched up hard against a grate and crawled out.

“What are you two doing here?”

They looked up.

A very confused Autobot looked down at them, blaster leveled.

---

By *tomorrow*, Pharma meant *too slagged early tomorrow for your processor to online*.

Ratchet rubbed his helm, engulfed the last of the drippings-poor midgrade, and went to disinfect himself for the procedure.

He had no idea what to do.

If only kicking Shockwave in the interface components was what he was here to do. He’d do it happily. But no. What was going to be done was horrific, and even *Shockwave* didn’t deserve it.

*Are you sure?* a little voice in his processor asked. *He certainly wasted no time in hacking Arcee.*

But he'd left her personality alone. He hadn't been there to *change* anything. There was a big difference there.

Ratchet exvented heavily and looked down at his servos. While he personally thought that there was a certain amount of wiggle room in one's Oath when it came to enemies who were actively trying to offline you, this was coldblooded mutilation of a helpless mechanism, and there was no room for excuses or justifications there. If he went into that room and completed this procedure—frag, even if it had been on that slagframed scraplet fragger Lockdown—he would have violated that Oath.

His servos shook. Arcee with her processor splayed out played before his optics again, and he remembered the lurch of rage, the revulsion. That had been wrong. Shockwave had orchestrated that. Shockwave had done that, on Megatron's orders.

He shuttered his optics. He'd sold out to the Decepticons to save *Shockwave*. He'd never be able to look Arcee in the optics again.

*This is wrong.* He clenched his servos. *I am not Shockwave. I'm not going to let this happen. The Autobots are better than this.*

"Ratchet?" said a voice nearby. "Are you all right?"

He opened his optics and saw Ambulon. The other doctor had the grace to look embarrassed. "Only, you've been staring at the disinfectant for a while."

"It's too early, kid," said Ratchet, and went back to scrubbing his servos, feeling more as if he were dirtying them than cleaning them.

Strika would come, wouldn't she? If the alternative was losing Shockwave, Strika *had* to come.

He took a deep ventilation, and stepped into the operating room.

Pharma smirked at him, wings hiked proudly up. "There's been a slight change in plans," he said. "I took your recommendations last night seriously. You were entirely correct; we could not risk damaging an *important* prisoner such as Shockwave, not when the evidence of our tampering might be so obvious."

Relief swept through Ratchet. So someone'd pulled the plug on the whole damned thing, just in time. Perhaps Primus gave a flying frag about His creations. Ratchet made a mental note not to swear at the deity quite so often.

But Pharma's smirk only grew. "We've substituted another prisoner. I trust you are enough of a *professional* for it to make little difference." And he stepped aside, revealing who was on the slab.

Ratchet's tank lurched. "No."

"Political dissident," said Pharma, pacing around Optimus's unconscious figure. "Not too bright, so we don't have to worry about people noticing. And if he offlines, no one will care much." The door swung open to admit Ambulon and the nurses. Pharma was grinning now. "Good, everyone's here. Let's begin."

## Chapter 20

*Oh frag.*

Chromia stared up at the Autobot. Sure, she could offline him, but he'd seen them in their disguises. They wouldn't last until morning.

"Security alert," said Windblade, getting to her feet. The holoemitter made her a much bigger bot, with Elite Guard insignia on her shoulders. "We were checking the air vents. Have you seen them?"

"No," said the Autobot. "They just told me to guard this section." He exvented heavily. "Like anyone with sense would come through here. You'd have to walk under the Magnus's office window if you didn't take the vents."

"Would you prefer the vents?" said Windblade, grinning. "We have to get moving again. Good luck with the energon, soldier."

"Good luck with the vents, sir," said the Autobot, and saluted them.

They walked with the leisurely pace of mecha with an unpleasant job to get to until they were out of sight, then broke into a dead run.

"Good job," said Chromia.

Windblade grinned. "Better than taking his helm off."

"This way." Chromia slid aside a grating, helped Windblade down into the tunnels, slung herself in and pulled the grating back into place. "Their security has more holes in it than Sentinel's common sense. You can fly here, by the way."

"*Good*," said Windblade, and transformed. Chromia threw herself into alt and led the way.

They made it to the bridge unimpeded, scrambled up onto the platform as the bridge hummed into brilliant life.

The Decepticons arrived.

A group of flyers shot out, established a defensive perimeter, and then the great bulk of a shuttle nosed its way out, hovered as the bridge disgorged another knot of flyers. A door opened, and the mech inside gestured frantically at them. "Get in!"

Windblade hesitated, stared at the Decepticons, an army by Caminen standards. "Chromia, what the frag did you *do*?"

"My job," said Chromia, strictly squashing the twinge of misgivings. "Come on."

---

"Pharma, you can't do this. He's an Autobot." Ratchet's servos clenched.

Pharma just smirked at him. "Political dissident, Ratchet. The orders came from the Magnus himself. Even you wouldn't presume to argue with him, now would you?"



“Sentinel? He’s a pile of scrap and you know it, Pharma. You’re just going along with this because it means you get to get off on torturing helpless prisoners! The fragging *Decepticons* have more morals than either you *or* the Magnus, and *use* more of their processing power, too!” He stabbed a digit at Optimus’s prone form. “This is *not* what I fought for, Pharma. In the War, or on Earth. If Primus himself rose up and kicked your—*all of your*—sorry skidplates into orbit, it’d be the best thing that sorry excuse for a deity ever *did*. You lot make Megatron look like a *fragging Prime!*”

Pharma was still smiling.

“Oh, Ratchet, you poor incompetent fool,” he purred. “Spouting treasonous sentiments in the middle of the most secure facility on Cybertron? Tsk tsk.”

The doors slid open. Ratchet didn’t need to look to know those were security bots.

“I’ll tsk tsk you,” he snarled, and flung out his servos, bringing out his electromagnets as he did so. He yanked Pharma off his stabilizers and pivoted to sling him into the guards. All three went down in a heap. “Ambulon, if you take so much as a *step* closer, I’ll crush him. Reverse stasis on Optimus.”

He glanced over his shoulder at Ambulon and the nurses, standing in a shocked huddled mass in the corner. “*Now*, slag you all to Pit! Do I look like a patient bot?”

Ambulon lurched forward to obey. Pharma opened his intake to say something. Ratchet bashed him into the ceiling, dropped him when he went limp, and shoved the two guards out of the room.

He pivoted in time to see Ambulon reach for a syringe, and picked Pharma up again. “Don’t even think about it, kid. You and the nurses get out. I’m not gonna hurt you.”

Ambulon hesitated, optics on Pharma.

“I’ve got a host of reasons to offline him, kid,” said Ratchet. “Don’t give me another one.”

That decided him. Ambulon gestured to the nurses and the lot of them scurried out. Ratchet flung Pharma out behind them, slammed a servo down on the lock mechanism on the door, and grabbed a welder from the tray of tools, welded it shut.

Now he had time to think. He went to Optimus, checked him. He was coming out of it, but it’d take time. Frag. If he’d had a choice he would have taken Optimus and run. He would get more trapped here by the second as the rest of the security forces turned up.

At least it meant that they would be away from the perimeter when the Decepticons showed up. If he could hold out that long, and aside from flinging the surgical tools at them, he was more or less unarmed. The precision saws were next to useless when it came to weapons.

Now to wait. He hoped Strika would arrive before they pried him out of here.

---

“No sign of Autobot military response,” said Cyclonus, just as dour as if he’d been announcing that the entire Elite Guard was bearing down on them. Strika peered over his shoulder at the display and grunted.

“Good. Alert me if they start powering up Fortress Maximus,” said Strika, and glanced back at the shuttle’s occupants. Most of Team Chaar had insisted on coming along—to the distress of Spittor’s

immediate neighbors—and with the makeshift emergency medbay in the back, it was uncomfortably crowded. Nautica had insisted on accompanying them, ostensibly to repair the shuttle if something went wrong, but Strika's suspicion that it was mostly to see the rest of her trine was confirmed when they picked up Windblade and Chromia. The three of them were having a hushed, urgent conversation, and both Windblade and Nautica seemed to be fairly irritated at Chromia.

As long as it didn't impede the mission, they could argue all they liked.

"General," said Cyclonus. "Scans indicate that there is a disturbance within the prison. Most of the security forces are massed within one of the central blocks."

Strika's optics narrowed with amusement. "That would be Ratchet. Are we in range?"

"Yes, General."

"Then attack."

## Chapter 21

The Elite Guard were halfway through the doors when the first blast shook Ratchet off his stabilizers and deposited him squarely on his skidplate in the middle of the operating room. He sat there, gyros spinning, and stared up. Well. Timing apparently was Strika's strong suit.

Behind him, Optimus groaned.

Ratchet lurched upright and steadied himself on the instrument cart. "You awake, kid?"

Optimus's optics flicked online. He reset them several times, then nodded. "What are you doing here?"

Oh that was a bad tone. That promised trouble. More than he was already in. "Saving your spark, kid," he said.

Optimus looked at him a long time, silent.

"I owe you an explanation," said Ratchet, and grabbed at the slab as the ground bucked again. "But I can promise, *now is not the time*."

Optimus said nothing, just looked at him, accusing.

"Just trust me, kid. I'll get you out of this."

"*Trust* you," said Optimus, slowly, as if the word were alien.

Oh frag. "Yeah, trust me," said Ratchet. "I know I've not got the best track record, but I swear that your wellbeing is the top of my priorities right now. I fragged up, it got you here, I'm going to get you out of here."

Optimus's optics shifted upward. "We're under attack."

"Yep."

"Are those Decepticons?"

Ratchet froze.

"I thought so," said Optimus. "Do whatever you're planning to, Ratchet. But leave me out of it."

Ratchet stared at him. "Optimus!"

"You called the Decepticons," said Optimus. "After everything—Ratchet. Did Prowl mean nothing to you?"

"Frag you!" Ratchet exploded, denting the slab. "Just—*frag you!* What the *frag* is your problem, Optimus? Do you think Prowl died for *this*? Do you think *anyone* did? So we could lobotomize our prisoners and call it mercy? So Sari and Omega could be kidnapped and tortured?"

"You're not making me a traitor," Optimus said, low and hard. "I don't care what you think you saved me from, but I am not becoming a Decepticon. Call this off."

"Frag, kid. Like Pit that's going to happen. Like Pit I'm leaving you here."

“You would, if you actually respected me,” said Optimus. “You’d respect my wishes.”

“This isn’t about you and me,” said Ratchet. “It’s about all of us. It’s about the AFF.”

“My duty is to remain here, if the alternative is siding with the Decepticons,” said Optimus, turning away.

“Duty?” said Ratchet. “Optimus. It’s the *opposite*. Forget the oaths we swore to Autobot High Command. What do you think is happening to the people who followed you? To the members of the Freedom Faction? They’re talking about legal repercussions, they’ll be sending them here because of what we said, because they believed in you. Because Sentinel can’t stand the idea of people liking someone better than him. We have a duty to them.”

They looked at each other a long time. Optimus’s gaze was almost too steady, his anger apparent in the set of his mouth.

“A lot of people have pinned a lot of hope on you, Optimus,” said Ratchet.

“I’m not giving them to the Decepticons,” said Optimus. The floor bucked again. Ratchet staggered. Optimus made no gesture to aid him.

“It’s better than handing them over to the Elite Guard,” said Ratchet. “And you won’t be. I negotiated.”

Optimus’s lip curled. “Of course you did.”

“They recognize the AFF as a separate political entity. You won’t be joining them. You’ll be *allying* with them. You’ll be on equal footing with Megatron.”

The power went out, and a sudden, eerie silence clamped down over them, the lack of the constant whine of security systems and lights. Then, very distant, the sound of blasterfire and screams.

In the darkness, Ratchet found the glow of Optimus’s optics and met it. “I know this isn’t the Cybertron you believe in, kid. I know you’ve been talking to Trion. We can be so much better than this. Autobots and Decepticons both.”

Optimus’s optics flicked sideways as a smaller blast shook the building.

“Autobots and Decepticons working together,” said Ratchet. “*Think* of it, Optimus. Or do you want to *help* Sentinel destroy us?”

“How can I trust you?”

“Because I fragged up once, and I will never let something like that happen again. Swear on my spark and Primus strike me if I lie.”

A snort. “You don’t believe in Primus.”

“Then I’m all the less likely to give him an excuse to smite me. Gods hate atheists.” He softened his voice. “Please, Optimus. We need you.”

The lights came back up, the dim glow of an emergency generator. The blasterfire was much louder now.

Optimus looked somehow old and very tired in the dim light. “Me,” he said.

“You,” said Ratchet. “You’re the face of the AFF. There are so many mecha who would follow Optimus Prime anywhere.”

“You’ve been listening to Alpha Trion.”

“Yes,” said Ratchet. “Come on, Optimus. We haven’t much time.”

Optimus let himself down off the slab, and carefully extended a servo. “For now,” he said, as Ratchet took it and clasped it.

“Fine,” said Ratchet, and the blasterfire was loud and immediate, Strika’s roar of victory rising over it. “Now let’s go rescue our new allies.”

The door blew right off its runners and into the room. “Ratchet, you clever old rustbucket,” roared Strika, cheerful with battle. “Brilliant timing. I’ll make a strategist of you yet!” He gaze swiveled to Optimus. “Optimus Prime, a pleasure. Now, on to victory!”

Strika’s team didn’t fight so much as brawl, cheerful and confident in success. Optimus and Ratchet found themselves swept up in their midst, surrounded by shouting mecha and an almost physical force of excitement.

Decepticon loyalty. Good for far more than discipline. Ratchet had been on the receiving end of this sort of euphoria—or at least *witnessed* what happened to those on the receiving end—and there was no way that this plan was going to fail, save the Elite Guard dropping a moon on the entire facility. These mecha were on their way to reclaim Megatron. Many of them had probably dreamed of this throughout their function. As for the officers, Megatron had been the center of the cause they loved through much of its existence. Having him back at its helm would make the universe profoundly right again.

He pushed his way up toward the front and Strika. “I have Pharma’s keycard!” he shouted. “I can get us into the cells, easily. No need to cut through those slagged security doors.”

“Pharma?”

“Director of the experimental program!” Ratchet ducked a bolt, and Strika promptly shoved him behind her bulk with a spare servo.

“As long as it gets us in!” Strika’s next shot took out the last of the Autobots firing at them. “Which way?”

“Left.”

“Decepticons, with me! To victory, and Lord Megatron!”

And they were off again, Strika keeping Ratchet close behind her.

Two skirmishes later, they came up against a reinforced security door. “Cell block,” said Ratchet. “High security.” He swiped the card.

The door chirped and slid upward. Strika peered in. “Locks should be easy to smash. Where’s Megatron?”

“Behind that.” Ratchet gestured to the second reinforced door at the end of the corridor. “You get them out. I’ll get that open.”

“Cyclonus, cover Ratchet,” said Strika. “The rest of you, with me.”

Ratchet headed down the corridor at as close as his mechanisms let him get to a run, with Cyclonus close behind him. He swiped the card and went to the one occupied cell behind that door, one with a physical door and a forcefield.

The keycard took care of both of those.

“Good morning, Megatron,” said Ratchet as soon as the door had slid open. Megatron blinked sleepily at him from the berth he was secured to. “This is a jailbreak. You can thank me later.”

“Where are the others?” managed Megatron, the words slurred.

“Off dealing with the other prisoners,” said Ratchet. He slid the keycard again and Megatron’s restraints slid away. Megatron tried to push himself upright, fumbled and fell back onto the berth where he lay, venting hard, terrified and angry.

“Panicking won’t get the drugs out of your system any faster,” said Ratchet, approaching him. Megatron snarled, but didn’t move. “I’m going to administer something that should overcome the sedatives. You’ll feel like slag afterward, but we’ll have time for that.”

Megatron managed something like a nod and tried to offer an arm. Ratchet injected the drug, noting the flinch and the way Megatron turned his helm away. Poor fragger had probably had enough of needles for a century.

The drug took effect quickly. Megatron’s engines roared, and he scrambled upright, Ratchet moving to support him as he staggered. “This way,” he said, noting how unfocused Megatron’s optics remained. “Just follow me. We’ll be out of here soon. That’s it.”

His reassurances were met with a threatening growl, but Megatron staggered along with him meekly enough.

“Strika, a servo?” Ratchet called once they were in the outer corridor.

“No injuries?” said Strika.

“None major enough to be aggravated by transport,” said Ratchet. “He’s heavily drugged. I don’t think he’ll stay upright on his own.”

“Very well,” said Strika, and bent to catch Megatron behind the knees, scooped him up in a rough emergency carry. “A pleasure to see you, my lord. Forgive the rough transport.” Lower, to Ratchet alone, “Lugnut is not here.”

“I know,” said Ratchet. “This way. He’s in the recovery ward.”

There was an all-too-familiar ingratiating laugh from the end of the corridor. They turned.

Pharma smirked at them from the head of an insultingly small security contingent. “Oh, I don’t think you’ll be going any further in *my* hospital,” he said. “Servos over your helms, or your friend Lugnut—and whoever he’s sparkbonded to—dies.”

Ratchet’s optics fixed on the device in Pharma’s hand.

Lugnut’s killswitch.

## Chapter 22

“You’re not going to get out of here in any case,” said Pharma. “Managing all of them? You don’t stand a chance. So just put your servos up and surrender.”

Ratchet raised a servo, the electromagnet crackling with charge, but froze as Pharma’s thumb crooked. “Don’t even think about it, Ratchet,” he said. “This detonator so much as twitches, and I’ll blow the charges we left in Lugnut’s pitiful excuse for a braincase. I’m not letting my hard work fall into Decepticon servos. The failures,” his optics flicked to the Seeker clones, “you can keep.”

The failures? Ratchet’s spark sank. So Lugnut wasn’t the only victim of the procedures his research had created.

His comms online.

*Cyclonus, you have command.* Ratchet’s helm jerked sideways and up to look at Strika, whose optics were focused on Pharma. *Blackout, take Lord Megatron.*

The implication of her statement hit. Oh frag. Frag, she was bonded to Lugnut, and losing both of them—

You can’t, he wanted to say, but Pharma was watching and he couldn’t give him a hint of what Strika planned. You can’t, he wanted to send, but Decepticon loyalty would never let her consider doing anything but. The lives of two Decepticon generals versus that of Lord Megatron was not a choice.

So he said nothing.

Maybe—and it was a slight hope indeed—maybe he would be able to save her from spark burnout if he got to her fast enough. *Optimus, can you fight?*

*Yes, why?*

*I’ll need you to clear a path to Strika for me. Can you do that?*

What little of Optimus’s faceplate he could see through the crowd had no trace of comprehension, but he nodded all the same.

“Well?” demanded Pharma. His wings were high on his back. Probably thought he’d already won. “Do I need to start count—”

Strika threw himself at him.

Pharma’s thumb flinched on the detonator, and then he vanished as the Decepticons surged forward. Ratchet pushed his way along with them, struggling to see where Strika was.

Strika’s voice rose over the fight, an involuntary raw sound of pain.

“No!” Ratchet shouted, his voice lost in the cacophony. No you don’t, no you don’t, *we need you!*

And then Optimus was there, a servo on his back, helping them push through the Decepticons, faceplate set. Ratchet counted. Every ventilation between them and Strika increased her chance of offlining along with Lugnut—because there was *nothing* else that could have prompted that cry, nothing at all. Even with that injury all those years ago she hadn’t made a noise. But the shock from

a partner's spark in burnout would rip a scream from the proudest of mecha.

There she was, a handful of Decepticons standing guard over her, her frame seizing in near-burnout. Ratchet moved them aside by the simple expedient of his electromagnets and bent over her, taking a fast readout. His instruments told him little. He put the palm of a servo flat over her chestplates, flinched away at the heat. Damn.

That meant her spark was throwing off excess energy as it flared with shock and the residual energy that had washed back along the bond with Lugnut's offlining. She might recover on her own, but it was too probable she might not.

Pharma shrieked, a horrible sound.

Ratchet bent to find the medical port, plugged in quickly. That charge had to be rerouted. Usually, he'd have the luxury of hooking her up to a spark regulator, but right now, he would have to reroute it through his own systems and discharge it somehow. His electromagnets were probably his best bet, though Primus alone knew what that would do. He'd just have to make sure he wasn't aiming at anyone on their side.

And hope the procedure didn't blow his circuits. The relays he'd need to use were ones he hadn't used since the war. There'd been no need. He'd maintained them, but this quantity of charge, a warframe in spark flux...

He didn't follow that train of thought. He directed his attention to changing the necessary processes, shifting the route of the charge—

*Frag frag frag it HURT!* Warnings flashed red in his HUD as the excess energy slammed through his circuits. Everything held, routed it away from his spark and major systems, but he could feel the necessary circuits beginning to heat and warp with the force of it.

He forced his optics online and raised an arm, watching with a sort of detached amusement the blue-white arcs of electricity crackling toward his servo. There was a really big Autobot lunging at Optimus, an energon axe upraised. Optimus was still unarmed, both servos clenched around the axe. In slow motion Ratchet saw the other Autobot produce a short dagger in the other servo—

He online'd his weapons systems, and the charge, now with somewhere to go, roared down his arm and through the electromagnet. Under most circumstances, he should have been able to catch Optimus's assailant and hold him in place. But with a warframe spark on the other end of the device, it simply slammed into the Autobot, knocking him off his stabilizers, and carrying him backward through the crowd and through a reinforced bulkhead as if it were tissue paper.

Ratchet lowered his servo, the charge ebbing as circuits rerouted themselves as the safe threshold he'd set was reached. He looked back down at Strika, checked the readings, and smiled. He felt like slag, and there was black smoke rising through his plating as those abused redundant circuits gave up the ghost, but she'd live.

There were a lot of Decepticons staring at him. Optimus too, with something like horror. Ratchet looked up at all of them, fanned his plating out to better cool those circuits, and said, "She'll live. Get us to somewhere I can work without being shot at, and I'll make certain of it."

"The shuttle is this way," said Cyclonus, gesturing. Ratchet lurched upright as a group of Decepticons moved forward to pick Strika up.

Then it was just him and Optimus. Optimus hesitated, then put an arm under his shoulders as he



staggered. "That was brave," he said.

Ratchet snorted. "That was my job. Come on, let's not get left behind. I have patients."

---

They did not, in the end, really provide a place where he wouldn't be shot at, but the shuttle's bulkheads were between him and the blaster bolts and that was enough for Ratchet. Once a field medic, always a field medic.

And they weren't getting hit *that* often. Cyclonus, for all his conversational failings, was a superb pilot. Ratchet knelt by Strika and tried to keep his balance as the shuttle juddered and lurched. She'd gotten off lightly, that much was clear. There was only minimal damage to the spark chamber itself, and all the completely slagged circuits were ones he could afford to wait until he had an actual medical bay to replace.

"Prepare to bridge," said Cyclonus. Ratchet put a servo down on the floor to steady himself as he examined a wire.

"Doctor," said Megatron, a great effort. Ratchet spared him a glance, saw hazy concern on his faceplate. "General Strika. Will she live?"

"Yes," said Ratchet. "The fluctuation in her spark was within survivable parameters."

"I am glad," said Megatron, and slumped back. After a long moment, "They will pay for Lugnut. They will pay a thousandfold."

Ratchet turned back to his work.

Near the back of the shuttle, an argument erupted, Chromia's voice rising.

"Don't be such a glitch, Windblade, he was keeping us on purpose!"

"I know that," said Windblade, ever calm and even. "What I would like to understand is why you saw fit to undermine my mission before then, and tell me it was for my own good."

Ratchet shook his head and went back to the task before him.

The shuttle bounced and the light went blue, then came to a lurching halt.

"Bridging complete," said Cyclonus.

Ratchet raised his helm and looked out the forward window.

The Decepticon fleet moved in silent majesty before them, an array of dull purple shapes in the weak light of a red dwarf. Ratchet stared. Command ships, cities in their own right, with battlecruisers and dreadnoughts pacing them, looking tiny by comparison, the attendant crowds of smallships, and the glitter of shortrange shuttles traveling between them.

"How many?" he asked.

One of the Decepticons near him snorted. "Not as many as there should be," she said. "That's the whole fleet, Autobot. That's all that's left of us."

Ratchet looked again. A massive fleet, but if it were the only one...

Three command ships. He hadn't counted the rest, but he knew that the Elite Guard boasted at least five.

"That's all we have left of home," the Decepticon said, and there was real sadness in her voice.

Optimus had moved forward and was now standing just behind Cyclonus, staring at the fleet. Ratchet looked at him, at the silhouette against the glitter of starlight on glass, the long red gleam of the hulls, and exvented heavily.

They'd arrived. They were free.

And all their hopes were pinned on one young mech who might be a Prime, and this one great broken fleet that was all that remained of an empire that had held the galaxy in terror.

## Chapter 23

What looked like half the Decepticon fleet turned out to greet them.

Optimus shifted under the gaze of hundreds of evaluating red optics, feeling abruptly very small. It was a relief to reach the medical bay, and he let out a long exvent.

The doors whisked open again.

“I heard General Strika was wounded,” said Slipstream.

“She’ll live,” said Ratchet again. “Strict berthrest for the next two rotations. We have a few other wounds, but Megatron and the other prisoners should be fine when the drugs get out of their systems.” He paused. “I hope.”

“What do you mean, you hope?” said Slipstream, folding her servos.

“Because Pharma made a worrying comment. I am concerned that they may have attempted some form of lobotomy on some of the prisoners. I’m not sure who.”

“Well, make sure.” Her optics ran down the line of prisoners. “My spark siblings are all right?”

“I’ll tell you as soon as I do the scan,” said Ratchet.

“And Lord Megatron?”

“Entirely unharmed. Either lend a servo or stop asking questions.”

Down the line, Megatron tried to push himself upright. “Who’s in command?” he slurred, clutching the slab so hard he left dents.

“I am, my lord,” said Slipstream, hastening over.

A pace or so behind Ratchet, who shoved Megatron back down onto the slab. “As far as you’re concerned, *I* am,” he snapped. “And I say you’re staying on that berth until you can walk in a straight line. You’re in a delicate enough position without denting yourself further—Slipstream, where’s the energon dispenser? Get me flightframe grade fuel, diluted by two parts standard fuel.”

“Not diluted,” said Megatron. “Proper fuel. I’ve had enough Autobot swill—”

“And if you drink something that rich on an empty tank just now you’ll bring it right back up,” snapped Ratchet. “We’ll have to refuel you slowly and wean you back onto your standard diet, or you’ll just hurt yourself. Optimus, stop standing around and make sure this slagger doesn’t get up while I’m scanning the Seekers. Sit on him if you must.”

Optimus stared at Megatron, who returned his shock with a very lopsided smirk. “Seems we’re stuck with each other again, Autobot.”

Optimus looked away, hating every step he took toward the Decepticon warlord. He wasn’t even sure if he was still an Autobot.

“So what occasioned the change of spark, Prime?” The words were still slow, somewhat slurred, but the old mocking venom was still there.

“Optimus. Just...Optimus.”

“Just Optimus,” Megatron repeated, and turned his helm on the berth to better look at Optimus. Optimus fought the impulse to take a step back. There were no restraints on Megatron now, only the rapidly fading effects of the drugs, and he was well within grabbing range.

If the world were sane, it would be his duty to snuff the tyrant’s spark, here and now, while he had the chance.

Megatron was still smirking. “Was I that persuasive, Optimus? Even drugged and restrained?”

“It wasn’t just you,” said Optimus quickly. “It was Ratchet.” *And he hasn’t told me anything. I just... trusted him. Obeyed when he required it. How could he have done this?*

“Ratchet,” said Megatron, as if trying the name out. “Your medic. He led the rescue, did he not?”

“Yes,” said Optimus. “Mine as well.”

“So you too were a prisoner,” said Megatron, and the smirk grew. “Perhaps we are not so different.”

“We are *very* different,” snapped Optimus, and did step back this time.

Megatron hummed to himself. “If you wish,” he said.

“We share no similarities,” said Optimus. “None. You would have destroyed Earth.”

Megatron’s optics flicked away. A long silence. Then, “Why are you here, Autobot?”

“Not by choice.”

“Not by choice,” said Megatron.

“I’m not a traitor!”

“And yet you were imprisoned.” Megatron’s gaze was on him again, and Optimus was suddenly very aware of his bare faceplate. Megatron had never seen his faceplate without the battlemask in the way.

Slipstream reentered the room, put a cube in Optimus’s hands. “I have an army to run,” she said. “If the medic needs assistance, Acid Storm is around here somewhere, and under orders to assist. Tell the medic I require a full report on the conditions of all patients in four megacycles at the latest.”

“He’s not under your command,” said Optimus.

“His patients are,” said Slipstream. “We’re allies, Autobot. We put our afts on the line to get you out. That ought to be enough for you. Don’t disappoint us.”

She left.

“Allies,” said Megatron, evaluating. “I will need a full report as well. What in the Allspark have Ratchet and Strika gotten up to?”

“Just drink your fuel,” said Optimus, and pushed the cube into Megatron’s servos.

Megatron handed him the cube back and heaved himself upright, then held out a servo again. He took a gulp and hesitated, then made a face.

Optimus stepped smartly back. The last thing he wanted was Megatron purging on him.

After a moment, Megatron raised the cube to his intake again and sipped. “So, Optimus, have you any idea of what those two are playing at?”

Optimus looked down, hating the admission. “No.”

“I thought so.” Megatron went back to his fuel and steadfastly ignored Optimus until Ratchet returned.

---

Frag. Oh frag.

Of course Pharma had used test subjects.

Of course Pharma had chosen the clones. If you lived in the sort of world Pharma did, they were hardly even Cybertronian. They were glitched. They were, in a word, disposable.

Thundercracker would not speak or fly again. Oh his wings and vocalizer were in perfect working order, but the precise damage Pharma had done to his brain meant he had no way to use them. And he'd gotten off the best. As far as Ratchet could tell, Ramjet would remain in a persistent vegetative state for the rest of his function. Sunstorm's short term memory bank was simply gone. And Skywarp...

He'd known Skywarp used to be terrified of everything. Never to this degree. There were other things, too. It was evident that the Seeker had been Pharma's last test run before he moved on to Lugnut. There was a lot of the same damage, but Pharma had done a sloppy job with part of Skywarp's alteration and made a single, precise cut a micron outside of the optimal region.

He'd done what he could. And he'd do more, because it was his own fragging research that had led to this, and damned if he'd allow the damage it had done to remain! But some of what Pharma had done was on a scale far past what anyone could fix.

Slipstream had taken it as badly as might be expected.

“They're my siblings,” she'd spat. “You're the greatest Autobot medic of all time! Fix them, slag you!”

“It's not that simple,” Ratchet said. “It's impossible to do even a partial processor transplant, which is what a lot of this damage would require. Processors are hard enough to repair even in the case of minor injuries—that's why I embarked on this research in the first place! But I don't know enough. Primus, I might offline them myself, rooting around. Skywarp, I might be able to patch together the injury Pharma inflicted that's causing the terrors, but the rest of it? Forget it!”

“Your research caused this!”

“Yes, it did,” said Ratchet. “And it's the same reason Lugnut's dead. But I'll make damn sure that I know what I'm doing before I try anything. I'm not using them as lab rats, Slipstream. I don't want their deaths on my helm as well.”

There was a tired, almost academic, cough from the door. “Forgive me,” said Shockwave, wavering slightly as he held onto the doorframe. “I believe I may be able to offer assistance, to a limited degree. Slipstream, know that your siblings will have an honorable retirement, even if there is

nothing to be done. They were wounded in Lord Megatron's name, and in the name of our cause, and they will receive the appropriate honor and care. We will ensure they are happy, and treated with the dignity befitting their service."

"While the sentiment is appreciated," said Ratchet, his plating *crawling* with distaste at the prospect of working with Shockwave, "you belong in berth."

"You are likely correct," said Shockwave, making no motion to leave. "Is General Strika—"

"She'll live," said Ratchet, trying not to let the exasperation show.

"Good. With the loss of a sparkbond, one must be certain," said Shockwave and turned to limp back to berth. Ratchet followed him to make sure he didn't fall, though it was precious little he'd be able to do to stop it.

"Slipstream," said Ratchet, "Thundercracker will likely wish to return to active duty. Only his vocalizer is unusable; fortunately, he speaks hand."

"I'll find him an appropriate duty," said Slipstream. "See about the others. When will General Strika regain consciousness?"

"About the same time I let Megatron out of berth," said Ratchet. "Which is not now!" he added, at the sound of metal on metal. Megatron, already halfway up, froze with an expression of mild consternation.

"The room has stopped rotating," he said.

"Then why are you lurching so much?" said Optimus from behind Megatron's bulk.

"Berth now," said Ratchet. "As soon as your tank drops below 80% capacity, more fuel. You can use pure flightframe grade to top up."

"Stop coddling me, Autobot," said Megatron.

"You're severely malnourished," said Ratchet. "And you're covered in injuries they didn't bother to properly treat. Don't you *dare* scratch that, you'll damage the nanites—have you any idea how filthy your servos are?"

The way Megatron wilted under that and settled meekly back was some consolation. Ratchet went to collect what he had for notes, and to get to work.

## Chapter 24

“You’re free to move as you please,” Slipstream had told Optimus, looking down at him with folded arms. “Except into areas which require special clearance. Inform Blackout if you wish to visit any of the other ships in the fleet; he arranges the cargo shuttle schedules, which are limited because of fuel requirements. Otherwise, your time is your own. You have limited computer access; no classified data. Your quarters are to your liking?”

The quarters in question were those of a petty officer; small, cramped, dark, but private—and with a private washracks, a shocking luxury. Optimus would have preferred to stay in and brood, but a failed conduit in the bulkhead behind the berth meant he was displaced for several megacycles, and all he could do was wander.

He’d never expected a Decepticon warship to be so cheerful, or active. Most mecha could have trodden on him and hardly noticed, but aside from the difference in scale, they could have been on an Autobot ship if one went by the bickering in the corridors.

Granted, fights in the corridors weren’t broken up by senior officers—frag, he’d seen one of the officers *rooting* for a combatant!—and there was a good deal more snarling, cursing, and cheerful ribaldry than would have ever been permitted aboard an Autobot ship. But it was far from his imagining of dark, gloomy corridors inhabited by sullen brutes.

And the fleet itself was beautiful. He spent megacycles staring out a viewport at the array of ships. His practiced optic could discern the hastily repaired damage, the dents that wouldn’t still be there on an Autobot vessel, the hasty juryrigs, but it was still beautiful.

Before he’d had a real idea of what the war had meant, what it had been, what it was like to see another Cybertronian bearing down on you with the full intention of offlining you, what a Decepticon really was, he would have adored this. These ships around him were living history. He’d looked up the conduits, at the serial numbers, and slagged if this particular *Conqueror* wasn’t the very same one Megatron had commandeered at the beginning of the war, the one he’d led into the Battle of Luna II. There were so many questions he wished he could ask—but he wasn’t here because of the history.

He was in exile against his will. He had betrayed the Autobots so completely he was welcome among Decepticons, and that was a shame he’d never have the luxury of ignoring. Had Elita felt like this? But that hadn’t been her fault, not like this was his, and the beauty of the ships in orbit before him dimmed.

“We are so much diminished,” said a voice behind him, and he startled. Glanced over his shoulder.

Megatron stood there, optics hooded, servos folded behind his back. He looked *tired*, with Ratchet’s handiwork patching his chest. When he shifted his weight, it was with an effort, slow and stiff.

Optimus said nothing, and fixed his gaze on one of the *Conqueror’s* companions.

“Even we cannot live much longer like this,” said Megatron. “No protoforms since that lucky shipment we bought off Lockdown—a necessary obscenity—and a pitiful few at that. We scrounge at the edges of space, harried by the Autobots, by the Galactic Council. And yet, this is preferable.”

“To what?”

“To what you escaped from.” The corner of Megatron’s intake quirked. “Sentinel was not the first,

nor the worst, bad leader Cybertron has had.”

“I didn’t escape,” said Optimus. “Ratchet—”

“Yes, lieutenants tend to do that. The good ones, at least.”

“I don’t lead *anything!*”

“The Autobot Freedom Faction isn’t anything?”

Optimus turned to face him. “Who told you that?”

“Berth rest lends itself well to reading reports,” said Megatron. “You have a silver glossa, Prime. Some of those speeches were indeed very uplifting. Might I have detected some influence of my own writings in your most recent address? I cannot blame you for not being more specific with the citation.”

“I didn’t know they were yours.”

“Of course not,” said Megatron. “Was that why you came to visit me, the second time?”

Optimus looked away. “Yes.”

“Even after you found that I was the author. Lord Megatron, the Emperor of Destruction, you still came to see me. Why would that be, Autobot?”

“Because I didn’t understand how someone who believed in the things you said you did could commit the crimes you did.”

“But surely Autobot Intelligence has not left my writings unaltered,” said Megatron, looking at him with a deeply unsettling light in his optics. “How do you know those sentiments were, indeed, mine?”

“I know propaganda when I see it, thank you,” snapped Optimus. “The inconsistencies were glaring.”

“Fascinating,” said Megatron. “Would you want a copy of the original?”

Optimus hesitated. His curiosity got the better of him. “Yes.”

“I shall leave it at the door of your quarters, then,” said Megatron. “So what so intrigued you, Autobot?”

“*Freedom is the right of all sentient beings,*” Optimus said. “You wrote that, didn’t you? They edited it so it sounded like you wanted to rebut it, but it didn’t sound right.”

Megatron snorted. “Of course they did. Yes, I wrote that.”

“What changed, then? You were going to destroy Earth. Like you leveled Praxus, like you destroyed Luna II.”

“Practicality,” said Megatron. “One cannot put one’s conscience above one’s cause. The cause becomes your conscience. That is what being a good leader means. It means doing anything you must to ensure the welfare of those who follow you. *Anything*, Autobot, and believe me, at the edges of space, that is not a gentle duty.”



“Like destroying a defenseless planet.”

“If it is a choice between that and the defeat of the Decepticon cause? Yes.”

Optimus recoiled. “That’s wrong. 7 *billion* innocent lives, for your fragging *cause*?”

Megatron looked down at him, considering. The silence grew, thick and unpleasant.

“Think on what defeat and capture meant to Lugnut, Skywarp, Ramjet, Sunstorm, and Thundercracker,” he said at last. “Think on what it so nearly meant to you. To be deliberately injured in such a way is one thing. To be turned against the cause you gave your spark for is another, to be made into someone else’s puppet—no, I cannot take any action that would send a Decepticon to that, not to spare my conscience. Those 7 billion innocent lives did not follow me, had not accepted me as leader, had not placed such trust in me. How could I prioritize them above the lives of those who had?”

“You are correct, Autobot. You are in no way a Decepticon. You in no way understand us, or the duties that bind us.”

He turned away, leaving Optimus standing by the viewport.

“They were still innocent,” Optimus said, more to himself than anyone else, “and that was still wrong. Freedom is the right of all sentient beings, Megatron, whether or not it’s convenient.”

---

Optimus ran into his first real trouble the next joor.

“I leave for an orn,” said a voice behind him, one startlingly beautiful, “and everything goes absolutely to Pit. That had best be a smudge I see on your shoulder, little one.”

Optimus stared up at the mech in front of him, a tank, almost as big as Strika. Far more slender, though, even with the tank treads mounted on his shoulders. Baleful red optics looked down at him through slits in a mask fashioned to look like a Decepticon emblem. And purple.

*Fanatic*, thought Optimus, and took a step back.

“No, stay there,” said the mech, and leaned down. “Well, well. An Autobot, running around the *Conqueror*? What have things come to?”

Optimus really wanted to take another step back, but every servo in his body seemed to have decided not to listen. So he raised his helm as best he could and leveled a glare at the mech. “Back off,” he said, putting as much authority in his voice as he could manage.

“What gave you the impression you were in a position to give orders?” said the mech.

Optimus became aware of a growing discomfort in his spark, a feeling like a closing servo. “I’m here as an ally,” he said, hating the words.

“We don’t need your help,” said the mech. Optimus gasped shallowly at the sudden bolt of pain through his spark. “We simply don’t need *you*.”

He couldn’t move, and his spark hurt. Warnings popped up in his HUD, glaring energon-pink.

“There’s one way you can persuade me not to kill you,” purred the mech, circled behind Optimus.

Optimus’s backstruts crawled, and an entirely new panic gripped him. He couldn’t see him, couldn’t

see him, he could do anything there and he couldn't fragging *move*!

"Rip that badge off," said the mech's voice, just by his audial. The pressure on his spark relaxed, just a little. A finger tapped his shoulder. "Just there. I know yours come off, Autobot. Remove it. It's an offense to the Decepticon Cause, one of those here. You dared appear before Lord Megatron wearing *that*?"

Optimus stayed where he was, looked straight ahead even though the sense of filled space at his back made him want to purge his tanks. "I will not," he said. "I am here as an ally. Not a Decepticon."

The other mech's snarl was agony.

An energy bolt whined past Optimus's audial, and the mech let out a yelp. Optimus could move again. He threw himself forward and away from the mech, as a second bold slammed into the mech's midsection, throwing him down the corridor like a doll.

Optimus looked up from his place on the decking. Slipstream lowered her null-ray and stalked down the corridor, kicked the mech hard in the faceplate as he attempted to rise.

He tried to surge upright, stumbled halfway up and doubled over, clutching his midsection. Energon gleamed between his digits.

"Oh, don't *whine*," snapped Slipstream. "That's hardly a meshwound."

The mech settled back. "Commander Slipstream, you overstep."

"No," said Slipstream. "You overstep, Tarn. I'm following Lord Megatron's orders. Do I need to call him down here, or does this stay between us?"

After a moment, Tarn lowered his helm. "Very well," he said.

"I'm glad you understood," said Slipstream. "Optimus, Lord Megatron and General Strika want to see us."

"Thank you," said Optimus, once they were well out of hearing range.

Slipstream smiled down at him, a tight, satisfied expression. "Strika warned me I might have to do that. Have a care where you walk, little Autobot. I might not happen by in time again."

Optimus's tank still rolled uneasily. He tried to ignore it, tried to ignore the edge of near panic. He flinched when another mech passed behind them. "How soon do they need us? Have I time—"

"Yes," said Slipstream. "One megacycle, somewhat less urgent than I made it sound to Tarn. I swear, the mech only listens to sentences with the word 'Megatron' in them. Everything aches, doesn't it?"

"Yes," said Optimus, with more feeling than he'd intended. The ache was the least of the problems on his processor.

"Tarn does that. He can manipulate sparks and frames with his voice, and it's an absolute pain in the thrusters to get him to do anything he doesn't want to."

Optimus glanced at her, realized distantly she was trembling. She'd been scared too.

"Here, your quarters," she said. "You know the way to the medical bay, and Ratchet can come get you if you'd prefer."

“Thank you,” said Optimus, and fled into the little dark room in time to purge his tanks into the washrack drain. He stayed like that several seconds, then curled up with his back pressed firmly against the wall. He scrubbed a servo over his faceplate.

“Just a Decepticon,” he said to himself. “Just a Decepticon. I’ve fought them before, it’s not any different...”

He pressed the heels of his servos against his optics, groaned. The sick fear hadn’t gone away, and he couldn’t stop shaking. The acrid scent of tank purge drifted up to him and he lurched forward, caught the controls of the washracks on the second try, then huddled under the stream of lukewarm cleanser.

“I can’t *do* this!” he cried after a moment, and struck the bulkhead with a fist, startling himself with the noise and the sudden pain. He cradled his helm in his servos again. “I can’t do this,” he repeated, and he wasn’t sure if he was talking about breaking down like a newbuild in the washracks of a Decepticon warship just before he was supposed to meet with Megatron, or about being...whatever Ratchet and the others seemed to expect him to be. “I can’t do this I can’t do this I can’t do this,” he said, all at once. The pressure of his servos was painful, but it somehow pulled him back to the present, to where he was. “I can’t fragging do this.”

A long pause, as he thought of the warm little base on Earth, about his team.

“I want to go home.” He shocked himself by saying it, by how much he meant it, and he closed his optics and rocked with the cleanser running down his faceplate, holding the memory of the base like a lifeline.

## Chapter 25

Optimus looked rough when he stopped by the kid's quarters, but since he didn't seem much interested in answering questions, Ratchet didn't press the matter.

Now they were all seated around Strika's berth—Strika herself still on strict berth rest, as Ratchet still didn't like the behavior of her spark—and all optics were on him. Slipstream and Megatron in particular.

"Well, medic?" said Megatron, more a purr than anything else. "So what have you and Strika been about in our absence?"

Strika looked down at Ratchet, optics narrowed with amusement. "An alliance," she said. "With a dissident faction of Autobots...and the future Prime."

"The future Prime?" said Slipstream, sounding puzzled.

Ratchet gestured at Optimus, who recoiled, optics flaring with alarm. "What? No!"

"It's not impossible, kid," Ratchet said. "Remember—"

Megatron stood up all at once, bringing a fist down on the berth. "No!" he snarled, and even Strika flinched. "*Slagged* if I will put a Prime on Cybertron's throne! Slagged if I will restore such tyranny!" He rounded on Strika who squared her shoulders with an obvious effort. "You should have left me to offline," he spat. "Or be used as a gibbering puppet by the Autobots. I will not restore a Prime. I will not perpetuate that system that murdered so many of our brothers and sisters. I will never restore us to such a barbaric system. What was your next suggestion, Strika, that I allow myself to be made Lord Protector and smiling submit to that Autobot whelp in action and in berth?"

Optimus flinched violently and looked like he was going to purge. Ratchet got to his stabilizers as well. "If you would be so kind as to stop shouting for two ventilations together, Megatron," he said, "we might discuss this like civilized mecha."

Megatron leaned over him. "Civilized?" he said, a dangerous purr. "What, do you wish to civilize me, Autobot? Is this your great plan?"

Ratchet stamped down the terror and mustered a sardonic glare. "No. You'd be rubbish at cocktail parties."

The Earth term silenced and confused the other Decepticons, except Slipstream. There was something like a giggle from her direction.

"Cybertron doesn't need a Prime," said Ratchet. "But the Autobots will want one. Have a Prime, or a candidate-to-Prime, fighting alongside you, and the Autobots will be a lot more amenable to peace."

"The Autobots," said Megatron. "You mean to ally the AFF with the Decepticons, don't you."

"Face it," said Ratchet. "You need us. This grand fleet of yours couldn't kick the skidplate of an overcharged turbofox, and I'm sure that's exactly what you have crewing half the battlecruisers."

"So we ally with you. How do we know you won't return to business as usual the moment we stop fighting? We have little reason to trust Autobots."

“And we have little reason to trust Decepticons,” said Ratchet. “Optimus and I are deactivated if we return to Cybertron. Sentinel is cracking down on the AFF. Regulations are getting stricter, and I’d be very surprised if we weren’t about to see a return to Functionalist policies. In short, even if Optimus wasn’t around to support you, you’d look like a slagged good option right now. They’re *scared*, Megatron. They see what happened to you and the other warbuilds coming down the pipe to them.”

Megatron looked thoughtful.

“Ratchet,” said Optimus, very quietly, a world of warning in his voice, “I will not betray my oaths.”

Oh no. Oh no, oh no. *Kid this is not the place to say that!*

“You brought me into this against my will,” Optimus said. “I took the fall for you when you were caught consorting with them. I allowed them to blame me to *keep you safe*. And now you want me to help the Decepticons? It’s bad enough that everyone thinks I’m a traitor! I won’t make that a reality!”

“Kid,” said Ratchet, “Name me one thing Sentinel’s done that’s been morally defensible.”

“I am not helping Megatron take over Cybertron! That’s what Prowl died to *stop!*”

“I don’t think Prowl died to let Pharma experiment on political prisoners,” said Ratchet. “I don’t think he gave his spark so Sentinel could do anything he wanted, or so Autobot enforcers could shoot peaceful protesters.”

“And how many people will the Decepticons kill if we win?” said Optimus. “You want a Decepticon-controlled Cybertron, Megatron, I heard you say so myself. I’m supposed to protect the civilians, not hand them over to your whims!”

“And what about the people who followed you and are now being attacked by your comrades in the Elite Guard?” asked Ratchet. “You were as outraged as I at what happened to Lugnut. You knew we needed reform.”

“But not *theirs!*” said Optimus, and gestured at Megatron and Slipstream, both of whose intakes were curled in disgust.

Ratchet lost his temper. He rose, seized a datapad, and pushed into Optimus’s servos. “Here. Watch that, you stubborn drippan.”

Optimus did.

Ratchet only managed to keep his faceplate still because he’d seen that footage before. Neither Megatron nor Optimus had, and as Megatron leaned over Optimus’s shoulder, Ratchet could see his expression change to one of strictly repressed rage.

“That’s what happened while we’ve been gone,” said Ratchet. “Those were your followers, in a peaceful protest, which was brutally repressed by the Elite Guard. They won’t release the casualty report, but we know at least 60 mecha have been imprisoned. Political prisoners, like you. Do you want to take chances on what will happen to them?”

“This is all too familiar,” said Megatron, a quiet rumble. “You may not want to be a Decepticon, little Autobot, but your followers are being treated as we were at the outset of our war.”

“Think about Omega and Sari,” said Ratchet. “And what MRD’s done.”

Optimus turned an agonized faceplate to them, put the datapad down carefully on the berth. “I need some time,” he said, and staggered from the room.

Megatron lifted the datapad and looked at it a long time. “They must believe in him a great deal to risk this.”

“Yes,” said Ratchet. “We all do. We all did.”

Megatron’s intake quirked. “Indeed. He did inspire your little team to defy me.”

---

Optimus pressed both servos over his optics, wished he could purge the memory from his databanks. How could they be so stupid? How could they believe so much in him? He’d only made a few speeches. He was a failure. Everyone should have known that.

No casualty report. Sixty imprisoned.

It was going to get worse, he knew it. People would get angry, and Sentinel would panic, and the people would *lose*. He knew the Elite Guard. Civilians wouldn’t stand a chance. Protests didn’t work if no one powerful enough cared. They just got people dead.

Had Megatron felt like this, at the beginning of the war? He didn’t want to become Megatron. But turning his back on something he started, that was wrong. Even if he could say, “I didn’t mean it,” with the slightest degree of honesty—and he couldn’t—they wouldn’t stop. They’d find someone else.

They believed in him and he owed them for that. He wondered if that was what Megatron had meant about a leader’s duty. Megatron took it too far but he was wrong. Optimus did understand it, had understood it back on Earth with his team.

He wished Prowl were here. Prowl would have known what was *right*, not what was expedient, but Ratchet was damned right about one thing; Prowl would never have wanted innocents attacked, would have said the side that did that was the enemy.

*I have to do this, he realized. For them. I can’t walk away now and abandon them.*

The idea of allying with the Decepticons was loathsome, made his plating crawl, but the alternative —

—*sparking servo in a puddle of energon, civilian screams, blasterfire, an enforcer laughing—*

—the alternative was unacceptable. He had not taken oath to support that sort of thing. The Decepticons were not currently attacking civilians. They were offering help. If they reneged on that bargain, he’d deal with that when it happened. In the meantime, saving sparks took precedence.

*Besides, he thought, grimly amused, I did fight Megatron once before. I guess it won’t be as bad the second time, right?*

For the first time in a long time, he felt more like himself.

---

“I’ll do it,” he said, as the medical bay doors closed behind him. He squared his shoulders under the scrutiny of four pairs of optics, only one of them blue. “You were right. I do owe them.”

He walked forward, keeping his back straight and his helm up. “But I have conditions.”

Megatron smirked. “As do I, Autobot. What are your conditions?”

“If we win, you’re not taking complete control. We will hold free elections as soon as possible.”

“Free elections,” said Megatron, flat.

“A human tradition we would do well to adopt,” said Optimus. “In the interim government, Autobots and Decepticons must have equal standing. And there will be no civilian casualties, or summary executions.”

“All reasonable,” said Megatron. “As for mine, I will not tolerate a return to the conditions before the war. Warframes will be granted equal rights, and form will not dictate function. No class restrictions. No castes.”

“No arrests without warrants, or trials without the accused being allowed fair representation.”

“And if you become Prime...” Megatron’s optics flicked to Ratchet, and the words *you had better not* hung on the air, “I shall take an equal role. *Not* that of Protector; I want nothing to do with the traditional requirements of that position.”

“Understood,” said Optimus, suppressing a lurch of sick panic at the mere mention of that subject, and equally strong relief that Megatron was just as repulsed as he. What little he’d read about Primes and Protectors seemed to agree every pair had shared a sparkbond.

He did not want that degree of intimacy, with *anyone*, let alone *Megatron*.

“The particulars can be worked out later,” said Ratchet. “For now, we need to make a statement. We need to announce the alliance, scare the scrap out of Sentinel, and let our Autobots know that there is a place they can find safety.”

---

Optimus stared at the pickup, kept himself at attention, as Megatron made his part of the announcement.

“—and to protect the cause which I have championed, I have found it appropriate to accept the offer of alliance that the Autobot Freedom Faction, headed by Optimus, has made. Despite our differences, the defiance and the courage of the AFF and its leader has impressed upon me the fact that we are, for all the crimes Autobot Command has committed, one species, and while our allies may be small, within their sparks beats the warrior spirit of all true Cybertronians.”

Megatron was looking at him, motioning to him, and Optimus stepped up. “Fellow Autobots, it was with great trepidation that I made the decision to offer this alliance. But I believe that the evils which you are even now suffering are far greater than any Megatron—or any other Decepticon—offers.

“It was only a few megacycles ago that I saw the footage of the protest—*not* a riot, as the Elite Guard has insisted on calling it—in the square before the Primal Basilica. There, on the most holy

ground of our planet, peaceful protesters were brutally attacked by the Elite Guard. Some were certainly offlined. At least sixty were imprisoned, and having been a prisoner of the selfsame regime myself, I may only hope that their treatment is kinder than mine was.

“We cannot tolerate this. We cannot, even by silence, support a government capable of such cruelties to its people. We have come to a choice: we may either submit to the humiliations that Sentinel Magnus’s regime would see fit to subject us to, voiceless and helpless, or we may fight. After my treatment, after seeing the treatment you are subjected to, I believe the latter is the correct path.

“I swore to defend the innocent from those who would oppress them. Now, the oppressors are not Decepticons, but the very people who swore the same oath I did. Freedom is the right of all sentient beings, and one that has been denied us Autobots for far too long.

“In light of this, I agreed to an alliance with the Decepticon Empire. I believe this our best chance at survival. I have negotiated an extensive treaty with Megatron. The stipulations include requirements for: no trials *in absentia*, no arrests without warrants, fair treatment of prisoners, and equal Decepticon and Autobot representation in the interim government.

“To all those who have followed me, at the risk of their freedoms and their sparks, I send this message. There is a home here, waiting for those who can no longer tolerate injustice, for the voiceless, for the wronged, for the wounded, for the innocent looking for safety, for anyone seeking safe harbor. We are here. We are waiting.”



## Act III

### Act III

And bridges back have all been burned

And freedom has been duly earned

I'll remember why I've come,

Remember where I'm coming from

--[Katzenjammer, \*I Will Dance\*](#)

---

"You know a sparkbond would cement the alliance beyond question," said Strika, some time later. Megatron looked up from the report he was perusing and glared at her.

Strika pushed herself into a better position. "It's something you need to consider," she said. "There is always the chance that this alliance will fall to bits the first time we go into battle. We can't afford that."

"Neither of us wants a sparkbond, Strika," said Megatron. There was an edge to it. It sounded like he was only barely keeping his temper.

Strika snorted. "My job is to offer you advice, not cater to what you do or don't want to hear. That's Lugnut's job."

A sudden horrified moment of silence, as she realized what she said and the empty place in her spark hurt. She looked away, trying to channel that hurt into rage, as any good Decepticon might, and it was harder than it should have been.

A warm servo touched the back of hers. She glanced at Megatron, who withdrew his servo as abruptly as he'd placed it, as uncomfortable with physical touch as ever.

"Lugnut will be missed," he said, voice rough. "But you understand why I cannot."

"That was three million years ago," said Strika, knowing she was pushing Megatron, and that it needed to be done. "He wouldn't want this."

There was a warning growl in Megatron's voice. "It is less what I imagine he would have wanted than what I can bear. He is deactivated, Strika, and I will not feel another die in my spark." He paused, obviously mastering himself. If she were Starscream, Strika strongly suspected she would have caught a servo upside the helm by now. "Besides, the little Autobot is repulsed by the very idea, as much as I am. *That* is what matters."

"Nevertheless. It is something to keep in processor."

He frowned at her. She went back to reading as if nothing had happened, and with a grumble, he settled back to his work as well.

---

Refugees trickled in.

Not many, not at first, only the truly desperate. Ratchet found himself repairing some truly ugly wounds, ones left untreated for long periods.

“Can’t go to the hospitals,” said one minibot, as Ratchet carefully welded a seeping gash on his helm. He flexed his new arm, frowning at the mismatched appendage. Even Ratchet’s skill hadn’t been enough to save it, not with the damage inflicted. “They turn you in, and the Elite Guard’s worse than taking your chances with offlining.”

Ratchet grumbled at that. “Come see me if you have any difficulty with stability or helmaches. Go with him, he’ll show you to your quarters.”

“I was just doing my job!” shrilled a newsbot, when Ratchet asked him how he’d sustained his injury. “Documenting a protest. Next thing I know, there’s this enforcer yanking my microphone out! It’s deep wired! I lodged a formal protest and the newsservice terminated my contract. They were watching me. I had to go.”

“I’ll see if I can find a replacement,” said Ratchet. “Don’t hold your vents, though.”

“I didn’t sign up for this,” said an Enforcer, sitting glumly in the exam room. He was relatively unmarked. “They told me to shoot civilians. That’s not what you’re supposed to do. And turning them over? Frag that. Elite Guard’s worse than the ‘cons. I fought in the war. Wasn’t for this.”

“Same here,” said Ratchet. “You’re clean. Go with Tailspin over there. He’ll show you to your quarters.”

To his shock, Ambulon made an appearance, with one of the nurses, First Aid, in tow. He didn’t say a word as he was checked. First Aid said plenty.

“It’s not *right*,” he said. “None of what we were doing was right.”

“Then why do it for so long?” said Ratchet, too angry not to ask.

“Ambulon *had to*,” said First Aid. “They were watching him. He used to be a Decepticon, you know. He *had to*.”

“And why did you?” said Ratchet.

First Aid’s chin lifted, and his visor flashed. “I go where he does,” he said. “I didn’t want him to be alone.”

Wonderful. Lovebirds, as the humans would say. Ratchet shooed the little nurse out and put in a request to have the two of them transferred to the medical bay.

“They’ll be under my direct supervision,” he told Strika. “And I’ll be watching them to make sure they don’t get up to anything.”

“I should prefer to rip their sparks out,” said Strika, as if it were the most reasonable thing in the world, a bald statement of the obvious. “After what they did to Lugnut and the others—”

“I wasn’t exactly innocent there, either,” said Ratchet.

Strika snorted. “Don’t give yourself airs, Autobot. They appropriated your research, they used the scalpels. You weren’t nearly that important.”

“Which they couldn’t have done without my work,” said Ratchet.

“Stop trying to give me reasons to offline you,” said Strika, an edge in her voice. “Why, exactly, should I spare them?”

“I need more help in the medical bay. I’m all but snowed under and that’s with this caseload. Allspark help us if there’s an actual *battle*. We’re the only functional medical bay in the fleet, Strika, and the trained medical staff here is a grand total of *me*. Acid Storm is a great mech but he’s a chemist and he’s fragging well *lost* here. I need these mecha, and I need more. If you can find anyone you don’t want in combat, send them to me.”

“I will see,” said Strika. She turned to go. “And Ratchet?”

“Yes?”

“I meant it about the research.” She paused. “If you must guilt yourself, then fix the problem, but don’t you dare come looking to me for absolution. I won’t grant it.”

---

The Autobot arrivals all wanted to talk to him. He couldn’t understand it.

They all kept calling him Prime.

And none of them seemed to realize that they hadn’t a filing’s hope in a smelting pit of winning.

Even Optimus, who had managed to hold off the Decepticons with nothing more than a spacebridge repair team, knew slagged well that the current force he and Megatron commanded was no match for the Elite Guard.

A handful had joined. Ten mecha, now, with one or two trickling in. Very few officers. Mostly political.

They weren’t going to win. He was going to lead a group that *trusted* him into defeat. This was foolish. Never mind it was the right thing, it wasn’t going to work, and working with the Decepticons could only get them into more trouble.

He could hope that more mecha would come but he didn’t want to bet on it. How had Megatron found such support? How long would it take to coax a ragtag group of scared Autobots into some semblance of structure? If they were indeed going to war, they needed enough strength to be able to defy the Decepticons if such a necessity arose.

Bumblebee and Bulkhead had yet to turn up.

That realization alone made Optimus’s spark hurt. Of course it wouldn’t be fair to expect them to go against the Elite Guard and Sentinel for his sake. They’d had nothing to do with the Autobot Freedom Faction. They’d barely even spoken since he’d been removed from power.

He ex-vented, heavily, and began the long walk back to his quarters.

Halfway there, he found Megatron leaning heavily against a wall, looking at the door with a fixed intensity that seemed out of place.

“Megatron?”

Megatron flinched upright, flinched again as the movement set off the door.

“Optimus,” he said.

“Do you require assistance?” said Optimus.

“No,” said Megatron. “No. Leave me.”

Optimus gave him a deeply suspicious look. Megatron glanced at him, then away.

“It is, at times, difficult to remember that I am able to open the doors on my own,” he said, as if he grudged every word.

Optimus mustered a weak smile. “It’s the privacy for me,” he admitted.

“The privacy of my own processor sufficed, after a time,” said Megatron. His mouth twisted. “When they saw fit to allow me that much.”

“I am sorry,” said Optimus.

“You have nothing to apologize for,” said Megatron. “You were as betrayed as I.”

“I chose to deliver you to that fate,” said Optimus.

Megatron looked at him. “Yes,” he said, “you did.”

Optimus ducked his helm. There was a silence.

“I will see you tomorrow,” said Megatron. “I believe we have a strategy meeting.”

“Yes,” said Optimus. “We do.”

“Good,” said Megatron, straightened. “I will see you there.”

He strode off, leaving Optimus with the dawning realization that he’d just repeated himself.

## Chapter 27

Strika watched the scene across the mess hall from her with amusement, Slipstream talking with Windblade, her wings held at a carefully neutral slant with such care they trembled with it. Windblade seemed unaware of her companion's anxiety.

"Not the worst alliance we could make," she said, not looking, as Megatron sat down next to her. A movement to her right stopped her, Ratchet arriving.

"What's this about an alliance?" he said, settling himself.

"Strika is playing matchmaker," said Megatron, downed his fuel in one long pull, settled back, leaning his chin on a servo.

"I don't have to," said Strika, nudging her half-finished cube over to him. She couldn't stand another swallow in any case. "Slipstream is doing enough of that for me. Personal connections. Stronger than any legal contract, my lord. Someone will have to have the talk about sparkbonding with her, though, and the one about *amica*."

"Not it," said Ratchet.

Megatron, with an apparent effort of will, nudged the cube back. "You need that," he said.

"No," said Strika. "I don't. I'm adequately fueled."

"Shuttlescrap," said Ratchet. "Frag's sake, Strika, you're 25% bigger than he is, you can't run on—" he eyed the cube, "—30% less fuel. Drink up, orders from your physician."

Strika eyed the cube, too. Its contents seemed singularly unattractive. She was running within acceptable parameters. "Does this mean *I* have to give her the talk?"

"I would prefer not to," said Megatron. "I do believe that would be more appropriate coming from her medic or her mentor, not her commanding officer. It would embarrass both of us." He frowned at both of them.

"Not it," said Ratchet again.

Strika raised the cube to her intake, paused before sliding the mandibular components aside from over the intake tube. "You're a medic."

"And you know her better. You're her mom, deal with it."

A moment of confusion. "Earth term?"

"Earth term. Implied parental obligation."

"Like organics." Strika put the cube down. "Disgusting."

"I've known some perfectly wonderful organics," said Ratchet. "So has Optimus." He shifted aside to accommodate Optimus, who had just arrived. "Drink your damn fuel, Strika. Good morning, Optimus."

“Mmmph,” said Optimus, realized his company, and said, “Good morning,” before attending to his fuel.

“New refugee ship due in today,” said Ratchet. “Quite a few.”

“Good,” said Optimus. “Megatron, I took a look at the spacebridge yesterday. It’s not in good shape.”

“What would you suggest?” said Megatron.

“Bulkhead’s assistance,” said Optimus, looking down at his servos. Even Strika could see the misery and anxiety in every line of the little bot’s frame. “I’ll see what I can do, however.”

“That would be much appreciated,” said Megatron. “Holding this bridge may mean the difference between victory and defeat.”

“Yes,” said Optimus. “Indeed.”

“Well while you diplomats are accomplishing great things, I have a ship full of refugees to attend to,” said Ratchet, and heaved himself to his stabilizers. “Strika, your fuel. Drink it.”

Strika grumbled and raised the cube to her intake again.

The fuel tasted like slag. She had no desire to speak of to ingest the stuff.

After a moment, she pushed it back into Megatron’s servos and left before he could protest.

---

Jazz hated these meetings.

“So you’re telling everything we’re doing is useless?” snapped Sentinel, leaning forward over the table. “They’re still *protesting*?”

At least he wasn’t getting the brunt of it this time. Poor Sides, Ironhide’s replacement, was. The SIC of the Elite Guard slumped in his seat and looked like he wished he could continue on through the floor.

“We’ve tried everything,” he said. “Really, sir. Even deadly force. I advised against—”

“I believe they’re protesting the countermeasures now,” said someone else, impossible to tell who. Sentinel glanced around the table, did not find the culprit.

“Then try something else!” he spat. “Obviously, none of you have done enough. Serves me right for attempting this with a group of incompetent gaskets.”

“You could try letting them protest,” said Jazz, tracing patterns on the desk with a servo. He didn’t dignify Sentinel with a glance.

“That’s what got Intelligence relieved of protest containment in the first place,” said Sentinel. “I hope you realize this is your fault, Jazz.”

Jazz pursed his intake and still didn’t look up. “I might be more inclined to implicate the discontented officer who defected in the first place in that, sir.”

For a moment he wondered if Sentinel would have Sideswipe arrest him. A sidelong glance certainly showed Sentinel vibrating with ill-contained rage.

“Enough of this,” Sentinel said at last, throwing himself back in his chair hard enough to make it creak. “I want solutions. Real suggestions, people. How to stop these traitors, and keep them from converting anyone else. Offline them on sight. Arrest anyone who has contact with them. I don’t care if you have to burn half of Iacon. Don’t come back until you’ve got real answers for me! Dismissed!”

As the others snapped to attention, then filed out, Sentinel said, “Not you, Jazz.”

Jazz’s tanks lurched. Frag. This couldn’t be good. At least he knew Sentinel didn’t have anyone to replace him.

The doors swished shut. Sentinel was silent a moment, looking down. “Do you know what Decepticons do to Autobot prisoners, Jazz?”

Jazz knew pretty slagged well—those were his operatives who came back in prices. He was willing to bet Sentinel’s ideas, like those he spouted about organics, were a great deal more more colorful than reality.

“Poor Optimus,” said Sentinel, in a tone of such false sympathy it made Jazz’s plating crawl. There was a nasty note of satisfaction there, a certain righteousness that did not sit at all well with Jazz. “If he’s very lucky, he’s Megatron’s personal toy. If not...” He glanced up. “More propaganda, Jazz. Make sure people know these things. It’s their right, after all. And be a bit more creative. Your last campaign was lackluster, to say the least.”

“Yes sir,” said Jazz, and went.

He was an Autobot. He would remain an Autobot until he offlined. The Decepticons could not be allowed to take Cybertron, and if the price of that was having to work around Sentinel, so be it.

But right now, Sentinel was too universally disliked to maintain. Jazz smirked to himself. He’d had a recorder on him throughout the meeting. Applied correctly, it should be enough to convince the necessary parties that Sentinel was a liability. The Council was smart enough to realize that a Magnus giving orders to kill his own people wasn’t tenable.

*There are always options, Ratchet, he thought, with a flash of anger. But you had go make the grand stupid gesture, didn’t you?*

If Ratchet had just waited, they would have been able to work together without opening the Autobots to Decepticon attack. Without betraying everything they’d fought for. Jazz opened his office, pulled the recorder out and frowned down at it viciously.

This was a fragging mess. Now they didn’t have to worry about unrest, but defections to the Decepticons, defections, quite possibly, carrying valuable information. Oh, he’d sent a few undercover agents off as well, but they seemed incapable of uncovering information of value. He was willing to believe General Strika was the cause of that.

From behind his desk, someone reset their vocalizer.

Jazz looked up.

The lights in the office were off, the window shuttered, and there was somebot sitting behind his desk.

“I’ll have that recorder,” the bot said, a femme’s voice. “Please slide it across the desk, then turn and

face the wall.”

“Why should I?” said Jazz. “Don’t think holding a blaster on me is sufficient.” He carefully didn’t reach for his nunchucks. There wouldn’t be time to use them.

“No blaster,” said the voice. “Everyone has pressure points. Yours is simply unusual.”

“What are you saying?” Jazz tensed.

“Prowl,” said the voice. “You want him to be remembered well, don’t you? In the current climate, it would be so very easy to make sure he is not. If Optimus defected, who can be trusted?”

Jazz’s tanks lurched. But Prowl would not have allowed his memory to be used as an excuse for cowardice. “Won’t work.”

“Even if it’s your own memories at stake?” said the voice, and something in the gloom clicked. “Everyone has an ability, Jazz. Optimus had his grapplers, Ratchet his electromagnets, certain deceased cadets their abilities to copy other’s functions.”

Something shot out of the dark. Jazz dodged to the side, was met by another something, thin and whiplike.

Then the weight of the bot herself slammed him to the ground. She was big, Decepticon-big, and there were far too many limbs involved. He opened his intake to call for help, reached for emergency comms, but a servo slammed over his intake and he only received static.

Something pressed to his helm, over his left audial.

“I’ll take that,” said the bot above him. His fingers were pried apart, the recorder wrenched free. There was a crunch. “Very good. As I was saying, abilities.” A cold little huff of ventilation. “I hack people.”

“Too bad,” snapped Jazz. “Intelligence bot. You won’t be getting any data off *my* drives.”

The bot snickered. “I wouldn’t be getting data off your drives,” she said. “I’d be putting it *on*. You’d never be able to trust your memories of Prowl again. I could make you hate him.”

Jazz snarled and thrashed.

“Don’t move against Sentinel Magnus,” said the bot. “Unless you want to see me.”

A stasis cuff clicked over his wrist, shocking him still.

“Don’t do anything stupid now,” said the bot, and the weight on him vanished.

---

Optimus cupped his servos around his intake and bellowed. As close to a bellow as he could manage. It was much more of a scream, if he was to be honest. “LEFT PYLON! THE SHIELD GENERATOR GOES ON THE *LEFT*!” At least there was some atmosphere on this asteroid, though if he resorted to comms, they wouldn’t have an excuse to pretend not to hear him.

“You appear to be having an interesting morning,” said Megatron’s voice behind him, coolly amused.



Optimus let out a huff of irritation, not turning from surveying the spacebridge. “The most strategic approach to this position is on the right,” he said. “It only makes *sense* to place the generator on the *other* side of the spacebridge from it, and as moving said generator does not affect spacebridge function, there is no reason not to. Unfortunately,” he glared at the crew working on the bridge, Decepticons all, and they snickering, “no bot seems to be listening.”

Megatron followed his gaze. “Apparently,” he said, and stepped forward. “Decepticons,” he said and the crew on the bridge froze and looked down, suddenly sheepish. Optimus was impressed. He hadn’t even raised his voice.

“Lord Megatron,” said someone, in an *oh slag we’re screwed* sort of tone. “Uh, we didn’t hear you approach—”

“Why are you ignoring our ally and your superior officer?”

Dead silence.

“You will treat Optimus with the respect he deserves,” Megatron said. “No less. Do I make myself clear?”

There was a ragged chorus of assent.

“See that you remember to,” said Megatron. “Please proceed, Optimus.”

He sauntered away—and it certainly was a saunter, there was no other way of putting it, not with the smirk—paused briefly, and transformed, taking off with a roar of engines.

Optimus realized he’d been staring, turned around hastily with energon hot in his faceplate. The spacebridge crew were looking at him. He reset his vocalizer. “Right. As I was saying, place the shield generator on the right pylon of the bridge, not the left—and look out for that relay, it’s not ready to carry a charge!” He started on his way up again. This time, no one tried to shoo him away.

How had Megatron done it? He hadn’t raised his voice, he hadn’t offered physical harm, just... lectured them, like a lot of ill-behaved protoforms. Completely different than his command technique on Earth. Completely different from how Optimus had been taught a commander functioned, much more like how he’d tried, out of necessity, to command on Earth. He’d thought it was simply because he couldn’t make the right decisions while maintaining the proper behavior of a commander, or because he simply lacked...something. That he was inherently too flawed to be capable of commanding in the proper manner.

But Megatron had used the same techniques, scolding the crew as Optimus would have scolded Bumblebee. And it had worked.

He glanced back over his shoulder again, though Megatron had long since vanished. Primus, but he wanted to be able to do that!

## Chapter 28

Strika folded her servos across her chest and glared at the holodisplay. Three Autobot ships were on the approach—and had already sent messages declaring peaceful intentions. One of them was small, the sort of shuttle all the other refugees had arrived in.

The other two were big enough to be warships. They weren't close enough to get a good scan of their weapons, but they made her nervous. It didn't fit. Not unless a large chunk of the Elite Guard intended to defect, and as stupid as Sentinel was, she wasn't about to bet sparks on him being that stupid.

On the other hand, if those were full of refugees, Megatron would have her plating for blowing them up. Optimus too. Impractically heroic, the both of them.

The door slid open, and speaking of sparkeaters, there was Megatron in the doorway with his servos behind his back. "General," he said.

"My lord," Strika responded, straightening up. Those ships were still three megacycles out; there was time for whatever calamity Megatron had managed in the megacycle or so since she last saw him.

Megatron produced a container of fuel. "Drink," he said. "I will keep you company."

Strika stared, voiced the first protest to come to processor. "But rations—"

"A small price to ensure my General of Destruction is fit for duty."

The sheer bearings of it all made her shake her helm—this was the sort of slag Lugnut used to pull when he thought she was working too hard, no matter how she snarled at him for it. The thought hurt, and she looked back down at the holodisplay and the Autobot warship vanishing into one of the pixelated bits. "I'm not hungry."

"I know. There's not much of it. Fuel."

"I don't want to." As soon as the words were out of her vocalizer, she realized she sounded like a petulant protoform and fanned her armor out in instinctive hostile embarrassment. She didn't care if he took that as insubordinate. A good fight—even though it would certainly end badly for her—was exactly what she wanted.

"Strika," he said, his voice worryingly reasonable, "you know it's necessary. We had this conversation before," and there was still the faintest hitch in his voice, "about Terminus."

"So you have some idea of repaying that debt?" she said, glowering at him. "What a compliment to be sure, my lord."

"Stop being provoking," he said, put the cube down on the edge of the table in front of her. "I'm not fighting you. I know slagged well that what worked on Starscream has the opposite effect on you. Yes, I am repaying that debt. Drink, please."

"You're spending too much time around the Autobots," she grumbled, staring at the cube. "What about you, my lord? You must be hungry."

"I am," he said. "But I know I'm fully fueled. It will cease being an issue once I am accustomed to regular, high quality fuel. At least, so Ratchet tells me."

Strika reached to take the cube. "I have work to do."

"Yes," he said. "Fuel and get back to it."

"Fine," she snarled, shifted her mandibular components so quickly the servos ached in protest, and gulped the cube down. To her shock, her tank didn't try to reject it, as she'd been certain it would. She handed the cube back.

His smug expression made her want to punch him. "Fuel regularly," he said. "I need you at full capacity."

Strika looked back at the ships in the holodisplay. "We should have attempted your rescue sooner," she said, not sure if she was trying to hurt herself or him more with her words. "We would have Starscream's clones, and Lugnut, if we had, and you wouldn't be—" she made a vague gesture.

"There was no possibility." There was an edge in his voice now, barely restrained anger. "You would have, if there was the faintest possibility of success. You are too good a commander otherwise. And I would rather all of us had offlined at the servos of those Autobots than have the Cause imperiled by your loss."

That was as good as saying she was a worthy successor. Strika couldn't meet his optics. If Megatron thought that...

"I said as much to Lugnut," Megatron went on. "He was very proud."

He would have been. Her consort may have had his flaws, but his ability to enjoy a loved one's successes was not one.

They'd known from the start that their relationship would always be second. Second to the Cause, second to their love and loyalty to Megatron. It still worked. The Cause could destroy a mech with its demands and sparkbreak; they had found a comfortable, undemanding love in each other. Lugnut had been something she could go home to, relax, a love that didn't hurt. She didn't realize how much that mattered, not until he was taken.

Megatron's words did help, because she did know Lugnut. That would have been a comfort to him.

Decepticons didn't waste time on maudlin displays. "We have a potential problem, my lord," she said, pointed to the holodisplay. "They say they're refugee ships. I doubt it."

Megatron frowned at the moving dots. "I agree. But if they are potential allies..."

"We cannot fire on them." Strika fanned her armor with a growl. "Of course."

"Get Optimus up here," said Megatron. "If he can't give us useful information, at least he won't be able to accuse us of anything."

---

As he supervised spacebridge repairs and refugee duties, Optimus found himself thinking more and more about Elita.

Her face was still clear in his memory, the tolerant amusement she'd regarded both him and Sentinel with, the little half-smile when she was preoccupied but listening to them. She'd been the perfect balancing point, adventurous enough to prod him out of his comfort zone, sensible enough to curtail

Sentinel's more foolish ideas. Sentinel listened to her, Optimus listened to her. With her there, their trust in her had extended to each other.

Cybertronians like order, *need* order, their instructors had said. In any group of us, even if it's only two, there will be a leader. Remove that leader, and all goes to rust.

Elita had been their leader. It was Optimus's fault they lost her. In light of that, the hardest thing he'd ever done was standing up to Sentinel back on Earth. He'd spent so long believing that yes, he deserved Sentinel's treatment because he'd been responsible for Elita's deactivation. A long talk with Ratchet afterward had helped, he supposed, at least a little. Ratchet had denounced his instructors' ideas of order with remarkable profanity.

Hearing it and believing it were two totally different things.

The Decepticons seemed to agree with Ratchet. They didn't follow Megatron and Strika and Slipstream because they felt they needed some kind of leader to function. They followed them because they had a cause—rather a 'Cause', you could hear the capitalization when you talked to them—they believed in, and because they adored Megatron and Strika. Slipstream was young and new, but they were willing to take a chance on Strika's judgement. It was about *who* led, not about needing a leader.

Optimus could see how Elita would have been happy here. A small treacherous bit of him wanted to be happy, but reality kept reasserting itself. They weren't going to win. There were too few of them.

The Decepticons had to know that, but they didn't seem to care. They talked excitedly of battle, fueled and tussled and argued and screamed at each other like a batch of overcharged cadets. Many were scarred. Some were even missing servos, optics, stabilizers, repaired in the crudest of manners with great loss of motion evident. Optimus supposed that their high spirits, their refusal to accept the gravity of the situation, had to be some kind of coping mechanism.

There were so many questions he wanted to ask Elita. *Did you like it here? Was it really what you were looking for, or did you feel as lost as I do?*

Most importantly, *Did you know how much we needed you? Did I do the right thing in coming here, too?*

*Did you know what Sentinel would become?*

He did wonder. If they hadn't lost Elita, would any of this have happened? Would Sentinel still have been capable of the same evil? He suspected not, which hurt, settled painful responsibility. If Elita's loss had sent Sentinel down this path, then all of this was directly Optimus's fault. He should be the one to set it right.

Which brought him back to the current situation and their sadly diminutive army. There was one good thing about it. He could hate Sentinel now. Not feel guilty, not hope that somehow he could fix the other mech. Not wonder if Sentinel was only treating him as he deserved. Sentinel had hurt innocents, hurt them badly, and Optimus could hate that. It was a huge relief.

His comms chirped. Megatron. "*Report to the bridge. We have a situation.*"

Oh slag. Megatron did not sound happy. Optimus transformed, ignoring the stares—Decepticons weren't used to grounders who weren't tanks—and hurtled in the direction of the bridge. What the frag had gone wrong this time?

---

Jazz went to contact his sources.

Not his usual sources. Contact here meant ‘hunt down’ and sources meant ‘someone I’ve managed to threaten information out of before for personal use’. He thought that a better option, given how closely he was being watched.

But no one watched people like Rattrap. Not unless they were very smart, and had no sense of smell. People like Rattrap disappeared through the cracks. No one paid attention to them, and precisely because of that, they knew everything.

*Besides, Jazz thought, expression hardening, if they track him down and offline him, he’s not one of my long term operatives. He’s disposable.*

He hated thinking that. Prowl would be horrified. But Prowl wasn’t here. Prowl didn’t have to make these decisions. Prowl didn’t have—whoever that femme was hunting him.

So he tracked Rattrap down. It took rotations. Not that Rattrap had wind of him, but he was that slagged good at hiding. Technorganics weren’t much welcome on Cybertron, hadn’t been for a while. Probably smarter of him.

Which probably explained why Rattrap, upon seeing him, let out a shriek of static and bolted for the next tunnel. Jazz caught him in a flying tackle and stasis cuffed him, then sat back. “I need your help.”

“And a fine way of convincing me you have too,” snarled Rattrap.

“It’s urgent,” said Jazz. “I want to know if you can identify someone for me.”

“And then you’ll let me go, is that it?”

“Yes,” said Jazz.

Rattrap settled the fur of his altmode and glared. “Right. Not like you’re givin’ me a real *choice* here, spybot.”

“That was my intention,” said Jazz. “The bot in question is a femme, Decepticon-big. Something like tentacles.” He noticed Rattrap’s growing unease and put a firm hand on his shoulder. “Her ability is hacking.”

“Oh frag,” said Rattrap. “Oh frag, oh frag. Lemme go. Lemme go now. Holy slag, mech, do you have any idea who that is?”

“No,” said Jazz. “Sounds like you know her?”

Rattrap laughed, high and hysterical. “Know her? Do I look processor dead to you? I know *of* her, and that’s more than anyone wants.”

“Tell me who she is, and what she does,” said Jazz.

Rattrap stilled and looked up at him. “You’ve seen her,” he said. “She went after you, huh?”

“Yes,” said Jazz.

“I want *nothing* to do with this. You know what that means? You torqued off someone big.”

“Like who?”

“The sort of big that doesn’t use names.”

Reflexively, Jazz glanced down.

“No, not Him, old Trion wouldn’t stand for it. All but.”

“Sentinel?”

“Oh no, not Sentinel. She doesn’t work for small fry like Sentinel. She might work *on* them, if you know what I mean. No. Someone bigger, way, way bigger. And older. Look, just let me go. I don’t want her after me.”

“What does she do?”

“What you otta be asking is *what did she do*, way back in the Golden Age.”

“The Golden Age. Before the War.” Rattrap nodded vigorously, and Jazz stared. Other than Ultra Magnus and Alpha Trion— “How can she be that old?”

“Easy,” said Rattrap. “Way I heard it, she used to keep the warframes in line. You start making a fuss, she shows up, hacks you. Gets you back to behaving. Way I heard it, no one else has that ability. Elite Guard would give their tires to learn it. Makes things easier, cos Trepan isn’t easy to direct. Way I heard it, she’s even worked on Megatron, and he’s scared out of his thrusters of her. I ain’t Megatron. *You* ain’t Megatron. Get what I’m saying? Will you *let me go?!?*”

“Trepan? That’s her name?”

“I think so,” said Rattrap. “Far as anyone knows. Frag, you’re not even a dead mech walking. I wouldn’t be in your stabilizers for *nothing*. If they offered you terms, take ‘em, word of friendly advice. Primus’s exhaust, I don’t want her after me, don’t drag me into this.”

Jazz released the cuffs. Rattrap transformed and scuttled away, then paused at the mouth of the next big tunnel, his alt-mode’s beady organic eyes unsettling in the dim light. “One thing,” he said. “Word of advice, cos I’m a nice mech. If she gets you, she’ll take her time. Draw it out. She loves it. She doesn’t play smart, cos of that.”

Jazz stared after him, as his long, naked tail vanished down the tunnel. He looked at the stasis cuffs in his servo, resettled his plating with a shudder, and, deeply unnerved, made his way back to the surface.

## Chapter 29

“Hamfisted fool,” said Shockwave, in his usual dour manner, startling Ratchet more because of the phrase than its abruptness, or the vein of barely-detectable anger in the Decepticon’s soft rasp.

“Where did you pick that one up?” he asked, carefully not looking at Shockwave.

“A phrase Megatron acquired on Earth,” said Shockwave. “He used it mostly to refer to a certain Professor Sumdac. It seemed appropriate to the situation.”

“Sumdac is far more competent,” said Ratchet. “It’s harder to cheat your way into a human PhD than a Cybertronian MD. PhDs require research.”

“Quite likely,” said Shockwave. “I like your proposal for the repairs to Skywarp. This should work quite well.”

“He won’t fully recover.” Damned if he’d just accept a comment from Shockwave.

“No, but it will address his emotional distress, which is unacceptable at its current levels.”

“Huh, didn’t know you possessed a conscience,” said Ratchet, then wondered if he ought to regret it as Shockwave’s unsettling one-opticked gaze settled on him. Shockwave stared at him several moments, claws unmoving on the console, unblinking.

“Classified information,” he said at last, and turned back to the screen, antennae canting forward.

It was Ratchet’s turn to stare. Had that been humor?

And every alarm aboard chose that moment to go off.

“Battle stations,” remarked Shockwave, looking up.

“Slag,” said Ratchet. “Get to your station. I have a medbay to prep.”

---

“They could not have stolen those ships,” said Optimus, immediate reaction upon seeing the readout, before he could second-guess himself. “Not unless half the Elite Guard has defected. But we can’t fire on them, not until we’re certain.”

“We’ll let them fire first,” said Megatron. “The Elite Guard is always so obligingly trigger-happy.”

Strika reset her vocalizer, startling Optimus. He looked up at her. She folded her arms and looked down at the pair of them. “I hate to ruin your little heroic fantasies, but there’s a decent chance they won’t. If I were them, I’d wait. I could bring my crew aboard, and take the enemy from within.”

Megatron glanced sidelong at Optimus and smirked. “I believe it would not be entirely inaccurate to assume that Sentinel is not as intelligent as you, General.”

Strika harrumphed, something Optimus had only heard humans do. It took a while. It was a very thorough harrumph, intended less as punctuation and more of a statement on its own.

Megatron folded his arms and stared back at Strika, flatly unimpressed. “I know you’re aching to

blow something up, Strika. In this case, we can wait.”

“As my lord,” Strika’s optics flicked to Optimus, “and our little Autobot commander, command.” There was a very subtle *frag you* in the statement.

“Have they contacted us?” Optimus asked.

“Nothing other than packaged messages,” said Strika, “stating intent to seek asylum.”

“We’ll wait,” said Megatron. “We won’t get anything over a comm frequency.”

“I have ordered the fleet to battle stations,” said Strika.

“Move into a defensive formation,” said Optimus. “It will encourage them to fire if they think we know.” He looked around the bridge. Slipstream moved between stations, checking readings. There was a restrained, vicious excitement to the entire bridge.

And the comms chirped. The small mech at the communication console said, “Incoming transmission from the Autobot shuttle, my Lord.” At Megatron’s curt nod, he tapped something.

*“Decepticon warship, this is Smokescreen, formerly of the Elite Guard. I have a shuttle full of refugees. We’ve sustained heavy damage. The two warships behind us are not, repeat, ARE NOT, Autobot Freedom Faction. They’re Elite Guard. I repeat, we are being pursued by Elite Guard warships.”*

“Autobot shuttle, rendezvous with *Conquest*,” said Strika. There was a bit of a squeak from the Autobot on the other end of the line, who’d evidently recognized her voice. “Shuttlebay One, prepare to receive refugees. Medical?”

*“Heard you the first time,”* said Ratchet.

“Good. Weapons—”

“No,” said Megatron and Optimus together, and Optimus turned to stare at Megatron.

“It could be a trick,” said Megatron. “We wait until they fire.”

“My lord,” growled Strika, “This is highly unwise.”

“Do not question me.”

“You think they’re lying. Fleet, hold position. Fire if fired upon.”

A long tense ventilation, then another. The battered shuttle crossed into the thick of the Decepticon formation and angled up toward them. The two glimmers that were the Autobot warships stilled.

“They’re retreating,” said Strika, a moment later. “Autobot warships are retreating. Fleet, maintain battle stations until further notice. Fully armed complement to the shuttlebay.”

Optimus let out a vent he hadn’t been aware of holding. “I should greet them. They’ll think they’re under attack.”

“I will as well,” said Megatron.

Strika nodded, turned to another mech on the bridge. “Keep scanning,” she said. “If the Autobots have any other tricks, we need to know about them.”



---

They arrived in time to see the shuttle limp in, trailing debris, and settle to the deck with a thud. The hatch opened—rather unnecessarily, Optimus thought, with the size of the hole next to it. He immediately felt badly for thinking it.

A minibot tumbled out, then drew herself up into a salute. She was mostly white, with blue striping on her torso, and a red helm that came to high fins in the back, rather like Blurr's. "Optimus Prime, sir! Cadet Smokescreen, reporting for duty!"

"At ease, Cadet," said Optimus. "Casualties?"

"Mostly minor injuries. We got a field patch on the one serious casualty, he's not at risk for leaking out now. Two lost servos, a number of mesh wounds. Sir!"

"Comm Ratchet," said Optimus. "Prepare to receive casualties." He took a step forward.

The shuttle blew up.

---

Ratchet was distracted from setting up the surgical suite by a dull thud and a shudder in the deckplates under his stabilizers.

"Were we just fired on?" squeaked First Aid, almost dropping the welder he was holding.

"No," said Ratchet, frowning at the floor. "There should be more, and we shouldn't have had that much of an effect from a laser blast. Not with our shields up. We're not returning fire, either." His tank lurched, a terrible dread. That was wrong, that was very wrong.

Somewhere, a fire klaxon went off.

"We ready?" he snapped, and Ambulon nodded. The medbay speakers crackled.

*"The Autobot shuttle exploded,"* said Megatron, flat. *"We need a medical team in Shuttlebay One."*

"Frag!" There were four decks between them. Wounded wouldn't suffer that move well. "We're coming to you. Send whoever you can spare to get the emergency equipment. First Aid, Ambulon, get the field medic kits. Megatron, emergency equipment is marked in blue. Move people!"

He stuffed the medical kit into his holding compartment and flung himself into alt, roared off toward the shuttlebay.

A sullen trickle of black smoke slid from the door, but not nearly as much as he'd expected. They'd already exposed the room to vacuum, good. People moved in and out, carrying wounded, and Ratchet got to work, keeping an optic out. No one he recognized in the line of wounded.

No Optimus hurrying in and out. Ratchet's tank curled into a tight little ball. He caught at Megatron as the warbuild deposited a whimpering mech. "Where's Optimus?"

Megatron's optics widened. Without a word, he threw himself back through the doorway.

Ratchet forced his attention back to his patients, but Megatron's expression had been answer enough. The dread settled harder, and it was only long training that kept his servos from trembling as he worked.

## Chapter 30

Optimus was lost in a Pit of smoke and flame. He hurt, hurt incredibly, and there was something pressing down hard against his dorsal plating. He grunted, tried to move.

The warning klaxons for fire silenced, replaced by the beep of the shuttlebay forcefield going down. Atmosphere ripped from his vents, and he clung to a protrusion below him to keep in place. A moment of silence, the fires guttering around him, and whatever it was on his back shifted enough to let him worm out from under it.

Atmosphere returned. Optimus staggered upright.

Smokescreen was on her pedes too, an expression of shock in her wide optics and pink energon staining her shoulder and back. “What—?” she started.

Then she saw the shuttle and threw herself forward, crying over her shoulder to Optimus as she did, “There are thirty people in there!”

Thirty people. Thirty mecha—Optimus’s tank turned and he stumbled after the cadet. They must have been packed like Earth sardines.

They had been packed like Earth sardines. There had been a lot of them, though it was going to take a very long time to figure out exactly how many. The damage was indescribable, the smell was a nightmare on its own, fresh energon and oil and burnt circuits. Smokescreen, to her credit, wasn’t sick, helped him hand them out to the other rescuers.

He didn’t know how long it lasted, an endless nightmare of energon and heat and smoke and not looking, not looking because when you saw up close what could be done to a frame by a bomb, when you realized it, you’d be sick, and that wouldn’t help anyone. Optimus kept working, praying he wasn’t hurting anyone more than they already were, though he doubted they’d be capable of noticing. He tamped his reactions down, working like one of Sumdac’s robots, while a little horrified part of him waited and watched and gibbered to itself, inscribed the horrors for later.

Then Megatron was there, by the opening of the shuttle, Megatron guided Smokescreen away and into the care of Thundercracker for her injuries, and climbed up into the shuttle and helped Optimus get the rest of them out. Megatron was there, covered in energon as Optimus was, and looked like he’d just shut down behind his faceplates.

Then there was no more to do. Optimus looked down at his servos, at the pink of energon and the black of oil.

“Ratchet is worried sick,” said Megatron, like he wasn’t used to using his vocalizer. “There’s no one more here. Come.”

After a moment, when Optimus couldn’t find it in himself to respond, he simply picked him up, almost a reflex. Optimus recovered himself, shifted his weight. Megatron put him down just as quickly, still no expression.

The shuttlebay was better.

That wasn’t saying much. Someone’s arm twitched in a pool of oil that still stubbornly smoldered. Megatron bent and picked it up, this obviously reflex, and they went together into the corridor.

Makeshift medbay. Ratchet welded a seeping gash, his expression grim. Ambulon and First Aid labored over a large truckbot. Thundercracker administered basic aid to Smokescreen, who stared straight ahead with unseeing optics. In a corner lay several frames draped with cloth, some appearing more as energon-stained heaps than anything Cybertronian.

The silence was worse than any screams might have been. They were all in stasis, the part of Optimus's mind that could still process these things offered.

Ratchet murmured something to the bot he'd treated, glanced up.

The utter relief on his faceplate made something in Optimus cringe.

---

Megatron and Optimus had fallen asleep in the corridor, propped up on each other. It was the most obscenely adorable thing Strika had seen in orns. Unfortunately, duty called.

She knelt in front of them and shook Megatron awake. "My lord, the scientists are finished with the analysis. We're meeting in the medbay."

"What did it find?" asked Optimus, who was wide awake and functional while Megatron was still resetting his optics at her and, from his expression, still wondering why there wasn't a cube of midgrade in the offing.

"They haven't told me," she said. "Quickly, before Ratchet passes out at the table. He hasn't slept at all."

"Of course not," said Optimus, clambering to his stabilizers. Megatron scraped a hand over his faceplate with an expression of disgust, lurched upright. "Try bringing him midgrade. It might mean he'll be civil for ten cycles together."

"Him too," said Strika, gesturing at Megatron, somehow managed to suppress the grim laugh. The little Autobot wouldn't understand. "Feed him two, and he might manage a sentence."

Megatron focused his bleary indignation on her. "You are a disgrace to the discipline of the Decepticon Cause."

Strika put the ration of midgrade in his servo, and he brightened up immediately. She handed a slightly smaller one to Optimus.

"Medbay, correct?" said Megatron.

"Medbay," said Strika, and led the way.

---

Ratchet was going to pass out on the table, he was sure of it. Even with the midgrade. He was too tired for midgrade. Swallowing was too much of an effort.

He was sticky, never a good sign. He knew he stank, but his olfactory processing had long ago compensated for the particulate matter, and had stopped telling him about it. He was covered in energon, and oil and he was pretty sure someone's wiring had fallen to the floor last time he moved a servo, which would explain that tickling itch under his wrist guard for the last hour.

He felt like he was back in the War. Only his comrades had uglier paintjobs.

Someone shook his shoulder.

“Frag off,” he muttered into the surface of the table.

“Meeting’s in session,” hissed Optimus’s voice, urgent.

“And if you think I’m lifting my helm, you’re sorely mistaken. Kid,” said Ratchet, adding the *kid* as a final insult.

Megatron, across the table, reset his vocalizer.

“Not for you either,” said Ratchet. “I can listen just fine like this. And give my report. Do you need me to give my report? I’m all for that. As long as you find me a berth afterward.”

Megatron sighed. “Go ahead, Doctor.”

“Of the thirty occupants of the shuttle, fifteen were dead by the time we got to them. Two more died in surgery. Of the remaining thirteen, we have a grand total of seven with moderate—that is, non-life-threatening—injuries. Note I include severed limbs in this category. The other six have severe, life-threatening injuries. Three of those are comatose without probability of recovering consciousness. Three, I believe will recover to some functional extent.

“Of the ship’s complement, we have ten minor injuries, one moderate. No deaths.” Ratchet propped his chin up on the conference table. “May I go to berth now?”

“You’ll want to hear the next part,” said Strika.

“Fine,” said Ratchet.

“The timing of the explosion was not random,” said Shockwave. “Someone in that shuttle detonated the explosive when they thought they could eliminate both Optimus and Lord Megatron. Fortunately, the mech responsible seems to have been an incompetent judge of distance. Here is what we managed to reconstruct of him, starting with the servo with the embedded detonator.”

Optimus gasped. Ratchet raised his helm further to focus on the datapad Shockwave put on the table.

He didn’t recognize the mech—someone in Jazz’s sizeclass, though sturdier—some kind of heavy-machinery alt. But Optimus stared at the screen in utter horror.

“That’s Roller,” he said. “We were in the Academy together. I don’t believe it. He would never—”

“He did,” said Strika, and stabbed a digit down on the pad. “Here’s why.”

Even half asleep, even with the other damage to the brain from the explosion, Ratchet could recognize the neat cuts of Pharma’s handiwork.

“Not another,” he said.

“The Elite Guard members of the crew thought they’d rescued him,” said Strika. “They were allowed to, as we were allowed to pick up the shuttle.”

Optimus looked like he was going to purge. “They did this because he followed me,” he whispered.

“What now?” said Strika “How do we prevent this from happening? I’m open to suggestions, people.”

“Can we scan for explosives?” said Megatron.

Strika shook her helm. “This one wouldn’t have been detectable. It was integrated with the shuttle’s self-destruct mechanism. Currently, my only suggestion is to require disembarking outside the shuttlebay and tow refugees in with a grappling cable. Less than ideal, especially with wounded.”

“No slag,” said Ratchet. “It’ll go down like a lead balloon.”

“Perhaps we could disable the self-destruct mechanism at a distance,” said Shockwave. Ratchet grumbled and put his helm back in his servos.

“I can do that,” said Optimus, sounding surprised. “I can do that, it’s a simple override in the shuttles. They malfunction, sometimes, and it got too expensive to keep replacing them.”

“Your codes won’t be relevant, kid,” said Ratchet. “They would have stripped access.”

“Yes, but any Elite Guard defectors will know them.” Megatron. Ratchet opened an optic to look at him. He seemed far more thoughtful—and awake—than anyone had a right to be. “Are the codes verbal?”

“They’re verbal, yes,” said Optimus. “We’ll require them to disable the shuttle’s self destruct while we’re on comms with them.”

“Good,” said Ratchet. “I’m going to recharge now.”

He supposed he should get up. Too much trouble. He dropped his helm back onto his servos and allowed his systems to power down.

---

The others had gone—mostly back to their quarters—and Strika looked down at their slumbering medic.

He stank. He was covered in other people’s energon, and oil. Some of it partially processed, by the smell. Some fully processed. It looked like someone’s oilpan had exploded on him, though she wasn’t sure that was physically possible. And he was deep in recharge, helm pillowed on servos, bent over at the conference table. He was a little younger than her, but once you got much over four million years, you had the same maintenance issues. Like what his spinal strut was going to say to him when he woke up.

She put a servo on his shoulder and shook. His optics flicked online, narrowed. “Frag off. I’m too tired.”

“Would you still be too tired if you didn’t have to walk?” she asked.

His optics narrowed further, little slits of blue light. Strika was abruptly reminded of Lugnut’s suspicious expression, all of his optics narrowed down to slits and the central one a pinpoint, an expression reserved for Autobot assurances and anything that came out of Starscream’s vocalizer. (And, on two occasions, her proposals in berth. Some of their wild differences in taste had come as a

total surprise to both of them.)

“Nooo?” offered Ratchet, drawing the syllable out absurdly. Strika huffed and picked him up. He squawked, then squirmed in her grasp, arranging himself more comfortably with his helm tucked into her shoulder, patted her shoulder (it left a servo-print of pink energon), and offlined his optics again.

“You are not going to like the next part,” said Strika. “If I leave you this filthy, it’ll crust and you’ll be an orn getting it out of your joints.”

Ratchet cracked an optic up at her, deep suspicion.

“You’re going through the washracks first,” she clarified.

“Sadist,” he grumbled.

*Well, yes, but not outside of a committed relationship*, Strika *almost* said, but he was too tired to get the joke. “Just doing my duty. Medics are important.”

“Even though my research killed your consort?”

Strika supposed questions like that were when people with mouths grit their dentae. “We are not having that discussion right now,” she said, turning down the next hallway. “Go back to recharge. I like it better when you’re not on such a fragging Autobot guilt trip.”

He harrumphed, but given it was hardly a challenge to her expressions of displeasure, she ignored it and palmed the doorknob. It slid aside.

She carried him into the tiny officer’s washracks, shifting sideways to get through the door, then set the cleanser to warm and deposited him in the floor. He squawked again.

“It’s not cold,” she snapped. “And no, I’m not leaving you, you’d drown your engine. Come on, turn over and get the other side.” At least most of it was rinsing away easily. She wouldn’t have to help him with his seams or junctions. She wasn’t in a mood to put up with any *thought we were just good friends* jokes just now.

“You’re evil,” he said. “Utter, complete—”

“Decepticon.” There, that was clean, that would have to do as clean until he was awake enough to do it himself. She turned off the nozzles and triggered the blowers. Hot air, right up from the engines. Efficient, but it did mean you smelt like a stardrive all the time.

Though Ratchet was proof positive there were far worse things to smell like.

She left him on the berth, dead asleep, his elderly vents rattling with each exhalation at a volume she would have expected of someone Megatron’s size. Unlikely it was something to worry about. All mecha past a certain age ‘snored’, as the organics put it. To be honest, it was somewhat endearing.

Like the mech himself. He was even the shape she liked, wide hips and shoulders, and he had a gloriously bad attitude. All very attractive qualities.

Strika shoved that thought back into whatever exhaust-pipe of her brain it had crawled out of. Whatever certain systems had to say, she was still too close to Lugnut to even entertain such thoughts. Far too close.

She changed course abruptly, and went back to the bridge. She didn’t want to face her quarters just

now.



# Chapter 31

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

They went to retrieve Smokescreen from the brig.

That is, Optimus went. Megatron followed. There was an awkward pause right outside the detention level, when both of them realized there was no other conceivable place the other could be going.

“I’m going to release Smokescreen,” said Optimus, putting a challenge in it. Megatron reset his optics, looking confused.

“I was thinking much the same,” he said. “Strika has, after all, cleared her of any wrongdoing involved with this event.”

“She deserves to learn what really happened to her command.”

“If you think it necessary. Do you believe she has potential?”

Optimus looked away, something like ice closing around his spark, Ultra Magnus’s words echoing in his processor. *It’s not in your programming.*

He was still sure the Magnus had been correct. It wasn’t in his programming. People kept insisting on following him. He was going to get them all killed.

Smokescreen reacted better than he had. She’d run back into danger to get the people under her command out of the shuttle. He hadn’t. Not for Elita. Smokescreen had been wounded, and done it anyway.

“Yes,” he said, instead of, *More than I*, and turned back to the door.

“Good,” said Megatron. “A high recommendation, given its source.”

Optimus turned on him, stung beyond bearing. Betrayed, too, though he tamped it back hard—that meant he’d been stupid enough to trust Megatron in the first place. He would have expected a jibe like that from Sentinel. Not Megatron.

Megatron looked back down at him with obvious puzzlement, and in the space between that ventilation and the next Optimus realized that he’d been sincere. He looked away, fast. “Thank you,” he managed, grudging.

Megatron kept looking at him, a flat uncomfortable regard.

“I suppose,” he said, equally grudging, “we ought to get to know each other somewhat better, in the interest of maintaining the alliance.”

Optimus winced inwardly at the reproof. “Yes, that would be appropriate.”

Megatron keyed the door open. “You first,” he said, gesturing, and Optimus stepped in.

The brig was not the most savory space on the ship. Glancing around, Optimus found evidence for a number of the stories of Decepticon prisons, the low lighting, the many cramped cells with suspicious stains, another door leading into shadows where sinister objects loomed.

Smokescreen had the only occupied cell. At their approach, she uncurled somewhat and sat up on the narrow berth. “Is everyone okay? Did we get them out in time?”

Optimus deactivated the bars. “I’m afraid not,” he said. “There was a bomb planted aboard your ship. The mech who detonated it, Roller, is offline, and we believe his processor was tampered with.”

“Roller? He would never! He recruited us!” Smokescreen came to her stabilizers, voice cracking. “He’s the reason we got involved in the first place! We heard he was arrested, and we couldn’t leave him—”

“So the others under your command have told us,” said Megatron. “It would appear that the Elite Guard have expanded their processor tampering to Autobots as well as Decepticons.”

Smokescreen folded her servos across her chestplate. It was probably meant to be assured and authoritative, but seemed more like she was hugging herself, and Optimus thought with a jolt of surprise how very young she was, younger even than him, and grappling with a grief and betrayal he’d never experienced so personally. Elita, yes, but there was a world of difference between the grief of losing one friend, and the horror of losing one’s entire command. Most of whom were civilians. He wished he had some words of comfort to give, but from long experience knew *it was not your fault* would go unheard.

“What’s the casualty report?” she asked, and this time her voice remained steady.

“Seventeen dead,” Optimus said. “Six severely injured. Seven moderate.”

He had a brief impression of grief and rage and horror before Smokescreen looked down, optics flickering. She raised a servo to the Elite Guard insignia on her chestplate, digits working for purchase, got a firm grip and jerked it free.

She raised her helm, met Megatron’s optics, and dropped the insignia, very deliberately stepped on it.

“I want to be a Decepticon,” she said. “If I’m not good enough, fine. But I’m not gonna wear that thing ever again. I’m not one of them. I don’t kill people without ever letting them *fight*. I’m not one of them, I’m not wearing anything that says I am. I’m not wearing the symbol of the people who murdered the civilians under my care.”

Optimus wondered if he should protest, could not find the words, looked at Megatron instead.

Megatron looked down at Smokescreen, considering. “Not a decision to be made lightly,” he said at last, and sounded entirely sincere. “Certainly, leave the Autobots. But becoming a Decepticon is an entirely different matter. It must be in part of *what* you are. You must be unable to tolerate injustice, believe in justice over mercy or peace. Your very spark must find any other alternative unbearable. We are not about protecting innocents. We are about power, about cadre. Protect your comrades so they in turn protect you. Civilians die. Your subordinates die. We are at war; this is the reality of war. Do not mourn them, honor them with the ferocity of your vengeance. We die. So be it. We do not sell our sparks cheaply. Offline with your servos buried in your foe’s spark and laugh as you turn gray. No Decepticon is here to protect. We are here out of rage, vengeance, justice.

“Can you devote yourself to that? Think on it carefully. I have no room for sentiment in my ranks. If you decide you belong here—decide with your whole spark, not from a momentary rebellion—you will know where to find me.”

He stepped aside. "If you wish to see your comrades, the infirmary is two levels up."

---

"Did you really mean that?" Optimus asked, once Smokescreen had gone. "What you said about being a Decepticon?"

"Yes," said Megatron. "Or I would not have said it."

"You can't just fight for vengeance," said Optimus.

"And that is why you remain Autobot to your spark," said Megatron. His intake twisted. "It is perfectly possible. Millions of years of war provides plenty of reason. The tyranny we lived under before that provides still more."

"From what I saw on Earth, you weren't exactly in favor of free elections and liberty for all," retorted Optimus.

"Better my tyranny than the Elite Guard's. I at least have *sense*."

"And what of Strika's tyranny? Shockwave's? Slipstream's? No bot is immortal."

"Shockwave and Strika know intimately what we lived under," said Megatron. "Slipstream has her siblings to remind her. Did you think we would be gentle, Optimus? Did you think, simply because you opened your optics to the brutality of your masters, that you would find us kind and welcoming, a haven for whatever strays you collected? Did you think that, because a virtuous Autobot felt some sympathy for us, we would mend the error of our ways, renounce everything your delicate sensibilities might label wicked? We have been labeled dangerous machines, to be kept in line or discarded. We have been exiled, experimented on, tortured, hated, for *six million stellar cycles*. And now you presume to judge us for adapting to such treatment?"

"I don't think a dictatorship is the answer," said Optimus. "I think power corrupts."

Megatron's optics narrowed. "And the Autobots are innocent of both of these?"

"That's why I'm here," said Optimus. "Just because the Autobots have done abominable things doesn't mean that I'm going to accept Decepticon crimes, either."

"Mercy for all," said Megatron, with a sneer. "An easy sentiment, for you. Tell me, little Autobot, have you ever gone unfueled? Have you ever been cast aside when your use is past? Have you ever spent orns of uncertainty, wondering if you would be decomissioned, if they would come to smelt you down within the megacycle, your only value the metal that composed your frame? Do not lecture me on morality. You've been pampered your entire function. You're hardly even a proper warframe, only a polished pretty replica of one."

Optimus bared his dentae. "I defeated you, didn't I?"

Megatron reared back, and for a moment Optimus wondered if Megatron might strike him.

"You're right," he said, while Megatron looked down at him. "I don't want to be here. I don't belong here. But it's too late to take back our announcement, isn't it. We're just going to have to get along, and the sooner you stop lecturing me about how little I understand, the sooner we can start getting real work done."

The surprise in Megatron's optics was heartening. Optimus pressed his advantage, as he might have when talking Bumblebee and Prowl down after a fight. "I didn't think that the Decepticons were

merciful—I'd never count on it. But I didn't expect them to be more merciful to themselves than their enemies. You're trying to spare yourself the discomfort of working with Autobots, of considering us your equal partners. It's easier that way, isn't it? It means you don't have to rethink the opinions that have gotten you so far for so long. But we *are* allies, and we can't spend the whole time bickering over who's been most ill-treated, because if we do, if we mince every single word and weigh every single infortuitous phrase that comes out of Autobot intakes, we are going to *lose* this war. I'm not the only one who's going to have to swallow his pride, Megatron. So how about you stop lecturing me, and we get to actual *work*."

Megatron snorted. "Then stop making assumptions, Autobot."

"That goes for *both* of us, Decepticon." Optimus glared. "Don't assume I've had everything go smoothly since I was online, either. I never even completed the Academy."

"Oh?" said Megatron, surprise and interest in his voice. "What were you doing with the Allspark, then? Surely the Autobots would have sent a special-ops force out to claim it."

"We found it by accident." Optimus looked away, faceplate hot.

"How do you find the Allspark by accident?" Was that shock in Megatron's voice?

"We were spacebridge technicians," said Optimus, half hoping Megatron wouldn't hear him.

"Spacebridge technicians," said Megatron, flatly. "You and your team were spacebridge technicians."

"We were stranded on Earth," said Optimus. "They wouldn't believe me about the Allspark."

"Spacebridge technicians."

"Yes, rub it in why don't you." He'd taken this slag from Sentinel. Damned if he'd take it from Megatron.

"*Spacebridge technicians*," said Megatron.

Optimus glared at him. "Yes. Have a problem with that?"

"As a matter of fact, yes I do," said Megatron. "You defeated me with a handful of untrained civilian *spacebridge technicians*. A handful of untrained civilian spacebridge technicians with an *Academy washout* halted the advance of the Decepticon army. Yes, I do have a problem with that. *It is fragging embarrassing*."

"Starscream helped," said Optimus, grudgingly.

He jumped when Megatron laughed. "Yes, he did. So, Optimus, are you done lecturing and feeling virtuous?"

"Yes. Are you?"

"Perhaps. All of your protestations do not make me any less right."

"So?" said Optimus. "Be right all you like, but I'm not going to let it jeopardize our alliance. Since when do Decepticons prioritize righteousness over war?"

Megatron's optics narrowed. Then he said, "One day, I will have to thank Ultra Magnus and the rest of the Elite Guard for not putting you in a position of actual authority. It would have made things

difficult.”

“Thank you,” said Optimus, cautious.

“Spacebridge technicians,” said Megatron, shook his helm. “I have grown old, and arrogant, and stupid. I suppose you will want me not to accept Smokescreen’s allegiance, if she offers it.”

“It’s her decision,” said Optimus. “Freedom of choice, Megatron. That’s why I’m here.”

“Interesting,” said Megatron, still an edge under the smooth purr. “Tell me, Autobot, have you had a chance to practice a war-sim since the Academy?”

---

Ratchet dragged himself out of recharge, and was halfway down the hall in search of some midgrade when the shouting registered. Lots of voices.

His sleepy processor registered that as bad. Grimly, he headed in the direction of the noise.

It wasn’t too hard to find. A knot of mecha jammed the hall, jostling together to get a better view of a wall-mounted monitor, which showed a display of red and purple ships in a holo-tank. It lacked something as a 3-D graphic projected on a 2-D screen, but it was clearly a war-sim of some kind. A very old war-sim.

Not a bad thing then. At least not yet. Ratchet frowned as a horrible suspicion struck him.

He wormed his way through the massed mecha, aided by judiciously placed elbows and a number of sharp pokes with the prongs of his electromagnets until he could see the actual holo-tank and the players.

Optimus and Megatron. Of course. He wasn’t sure whether to be amused or exasperated. Both were being obviously highly competitive, but Optimus was giving a damn good fight. Both Megatron’s optics were narrowed, his digits steeped in front of him. Optimus did something, propped his elbows on the table and leaned his chin on his servos and *grinned* across at Megatron.

Frag competitiveness. It’d been too long since he’d seen Optimus grin. Maybe this whole thing had been a better idea than he’d thought.

## Chapter End Notes

The idea of the war-sims and the setup with the holo-tank is blatantly stolen from David Weber’s Honorverse novels. If you haven’t read them, you should—they’re like Horatio Hornblower in space, with an awesome female protagonist and empathic sentient six-legged cats. The worldbuilding will make both your physics nerd and your 18th century European history nerd extremely happy.

## Chapter 32

Frames like Megatron's, the old field-commander models, had powerful arms, broad shoulders, heavily armored chests, tapering to a narrow waist and hips, and long, elegant legs, ending in stabilizers only just large enough to house jets of the necessary size. Weight was a concern; they had to be able to fly, but also carry heavy armor over the spark, and heavy armament. Essentially, they were a long series of carefully calculated compromises, weight to power, aesthetics to aerodynamics. And aesthetics played a large role in this; the long-ago Autobots who had built them liked their officers to look good, even if said officers were only supposed to relay the orders of their betters on the field.

It might be an old-fashioned, impractical, altogether Autobot attractive, especially next to the powerful allure of shock-troop frames like Blackout's, but in a word, most mecha still considered the effect attractive.

Strika preferred two words. Top heavy.

She whooped with delight as a truly ill-judged lunge let her seize Megatron around the waist and assist the rest of his mass over her shoulder. The Lord of the Decepticons hit the decking with a bang and lay flat on his aft resetting his optics up at her with something like shock.

Strika took a step forward, the snide comment queued for her vocalizer—

—and something went *thunk* against her chestplate. She looked down.

Megatron shifted his helm aside so he could see her around the barrel of the fusion cannon pressed to her spark, and smirked.

“Fine. Three rounds out of three to you,” she said. “You’re not entirely out of form.” The fragger had even arranged himself attractively in the fall, and she was willing to bet that had everything to do with their silent audience. From the brief impression of his expression, Optimus was rather taken aback by the ferocity of a standard sparring match. She raised her voice for his benefit. “But that last one was foul play.”

“I hadn’t yielded yet,” purred Megatron. “You gloat too soon. It’s a weakness.”

“The agreement was no weapons.”

“This isn’t a weapon, it’s part of my frame.”

“Tell that to someone who hasn’t watched you dismount it to clean it,” snapped Strika, and stepped back. “It draws from your frame, but it’s detachable. Weapon.”

He didn’t take the bait, which was disappointing. She wanted one more try, even if it came at the expense of a lot more dents. She was pretty certain that if she could contrive to throw him hard enough into a wall, he’d have to concede.

Instead, he looked past her at their audience. Who clutched the haft of his axe in both servos, Autobot-blue optics comically wide, stammered an excuse and all but *scuttled* from the room before either of them said a word.

“All the social temerity of a glitchmouse,” said Megatron at last. “How long was he watching?”

“Some time. You didn’t notice him? I thought you were flirting.”

Megatron lowered the cannon and frowned. “Not in the least,” he said. “He was far less timid when he was defending a planet with little more than a team of *spacebridge technicians*.” The term was just as venomous as the first sixteen times he’d used it. Strika snorted. Someone’s pride was still smarting.

“Then the question you should be asking yourself, my lord, is what exactly the Autobots have done to reduce their great hero to such a state,” she said. “He obviously does not expect his allies to think highly of him. Perhaps this has something to do with his dismissal from the Academy.”

“No warrior would go into such fits over a mere dismissal,” said Megatron. “He’s gifted. He must know it. He’s not enough of a fool not to. A mere dismissal doesn’t negate that.” He climbed to his stabilizers, still looking after Optimus.

“Autobots are different, my lord. They don’t like their officers thinking too highly of themselves. He *is* very young.”

“He beat me six times in the war-sims,” said Megatron. “We have run ten games in the last ten rotations, and he has beaten me six times. The mech’s a tactical genius, and they left him commanding technicians.”

“They left him to die,” said Strika, very mildly indeed. Megatron turned to stare at her.

“Why do you say that?”

“Earth. Even when the Elite Guard had full proof we were active on Earth, they didn’t send reinforcements. They left the technicians there. Civilians, Megatron, with no formal military training. Their *medic* was the only mech who’d served in a military operation of any scale before. Optimus had some training, but not enough to be left in command of a major front, not in the face of a Decepticon offensive.”

“Ultra Magnus made that decision. Not Sentinel,” said Megatron.

“Yes. What does that tell you?”

The look of suspicion grew. “Very little.”

Strika huffed out a long ventilation. “It implies something that I don’t like. It implies Ultra Magnus and Sentinel have something in common. A dislike of a competent officer in their ranks. Sentinel’s one thing; he and Optimus have had a longstanding relationship, one that turned into a rivalry after the death of a mutual friend. But Ultra Magnus? He was many things, but not stupid.” She glanced sidelong at him again. He looked confused.

“Exactly,” she said. “It’s not right, and it’s not characteristic for Ultra, may his spark rot in Pit. Something to think about.”

“Indeed,” said Megatron. “Very odd. I don’t like it.”

“Neither do I. Why don’t you go after the little Autobot? We have a strategy meeting in two megacycles. It’s a good excuse.”

Megatron’s optics narrowed again. “You imagine I have nothing better to do?”

“I’ll handle the inspection of the fleet,” said Strika. “Our alliance is important. Besides, the *Peaceful*

*Tyranny* and its crew need the fear of me put into them again.”

“Only you would view an afternoon of fighting the Justice Division as enjoyable,” said Megatron.

Strika snorted again, very amused this time. “A requirement for the position, my lord. Fanatics are many things. Obedient isn’t one of them. Did you hear about what Slipstream did to Tarn?”

“You’ve only related it fifty times or so,” said Megatron. “From that I gather you’re very proud.”

“Oh yes. Defending our alliance, and successfully dealing with Tarn? With brute strength? Take her along with you on the upcoming raid and put her in command of a few squadrons or so. You’ll be impressed.”

Megatron looked up at her, alarmed. “You’re training her as a successor.”

“No bot is immortal,” said Strika. “Two megacycles, my lord.”

She strode away, feeling very pleased with herself. Every megacycle those two spent together was one less argument to be had. They needed a strong alliance, and where Megatron led, the Decepticons would follow. Too much suspicion in the ranks, even now, and too much suspicion on Megatron’s part of Optimus. That wouldn’t do.

---

Optimus put a servo over his faceplate and felt like an idiot.

He should have left the moment it was clear those two were sparring alone, but instead he’d stayed. It had been enchanting, and shocking, to see the power of two true warframes on full display. Someone with that mass should have lumbered. Neither Megatron nor Strika had, and he spent a moment in sincere thanks that Strika had not been present on Earth. They would have all been dead six times over.

It had been amazing. How had they lost the War?

As a young bot, still in the Academy, Optimus had fantasized about Megatron. He was appealing, a distant idea easily distinguished from reality. Private as Optimus was, he’d noticed he wasn’t the only one; once, he’d even found a dropped datapad in the washracks with badly written, deeply compromising material on it. He’d left it propped out of the wet and noticed with gratification that it vanished again very quickly. But of all his peers, Optimus was the only one who’d taken the time to do proper historical research.

What he’d found had been horrifying and sobering, and shaken him out of *that* line of musing. The atrocities committed under Megatron’s command were sickening at the least. But it hadn’t entirely destroyed the appeal. Even in the records—which he now wondered about the bias of—there was something that intrigued him.

So, instead of the standard *swept off his stabilizers and carried away to be seduced by a growling warlord* fantasies, Optimus began to think wistfully about just talking to Megatron. Presenting himself as a history bot, wanting the truth, listening and talking and impressing Megatron with his intelligence—he’d been rather conceited before Elita’s death. A certain amount of sweeping off of stabilizers might then ensue, but even Soundwave couldn’t have pried that admission out of his processor.



Then he'd actually met Megatron, and found that being swept off his stabilizers involved a lot of claws, snarling and dents—and mostly was done in the full intent of offlining him. It rather lost its appeal after that.

But watching the two of them fight had brought such thoughts to the forefront of his processor, and the long-ago cadet had resurfaced, wondering at the clash of strength in front of him, at seeing history still alive. Those memories and wistful fantasies had come to the surface so forcefully he was sure it showed on his faceplate. Then they'd started bickering, an easy intimacy of friendship, and he should have left while they were unaware of him. He knew he'd intruded deeply.

And then they saw him. There was nothing to do but stammer an apology and leave.

Optimus had set himself up with all the 'paperwork' that needed doing—duty rosters, supply manifests, and so on, not even something as interesting as an intelligence report in the whole—in one of the window sills. The ledge under the window was just big enough for him to perch in, and it was far more pleasant than working in his quarters. He'd never been assigned a duty station, through either clerical error or a disinclination to assume any kind of authority over him.

Someone reset their vocalizer. Optimus looked up, startled. "Megatron?"

Megatron said nothing, looked around the room with his servos folded behind his back.

Optimus swung his stabilizers to the floor and stood. "I'm sorry for intruding," he said.

"You did not intrude," said Megatron. "The practice room is a public area of the warship."

"Still." Optimus looked down.

"No need for apologies," said Megatron. It was an order.

A short silence. Looking at Megatron, Optimus came to the abrupt realization that the other mech was just as uncomfortable as he. It was a shock. Was there some disaster? A problem with his command?

Megatron brought his helm up and looked out at the stars. "This is a thoroughly unappealing sector," he said. "A pity you have had no opportunity to see New Kaon."

No, neither of those. Optimus bit back a laugh. The Lord of the Decepticons was just really bad at making small talk.

Megatron was looking at him for a response.

"I'd like to," said Optimus. Then, "I was wondering, did you keep historical records? From the War?"

"Nothing more official than officer's reports and so on," said Megatron. He was surprised and it showed. "None of us had time to sit down and write a concise history. We were too busy with survival. Why?"

Optimus looked away, words crowding in his vocalizer. He vented heavily, collecting his thoughts, and settled on, "Because I've only seen Autobot histories. I don't think they're reliable. The most truthful account I've gotten was from Ratchet, and I don't think he told me everything."

Megatron snorted, a sound of supreme amusement and contempt. "Of course they weren't," he said. "And of course he didn't. The Autobots had plenty to be ashamed of." He paused. "So did we. You

do not fight a war and keep your spark intact.”

Optimus said nothing. Starting that argument again was not productive.

“I can tell you about it,” said Megatron. He perched on the ledge, which was sadly insufficient for the purpose, and encountered the datapads. “Though perhaps now is not the best time.”

“I’d like that,” said Optimus, quickly. He looked back at the datapads around him. He had a few megacycles after the strategy meeting, after all, and his spark was beating hard with excitement. He didn’t know if he’d ever get another opportunity like this.

He slid to the floor and sat. Megatron seemed happy enough to follow suit; it was probably more comfortable.

The datapads proved useful after all; Megatron used them to demonstrate troop movements.

---

Strika looked down at the starmaps in front of her, at the diagrams, and hummed happily low in her vocalizer. “Yes, my lord, I think this is feasible. I can offer very few corrections. Shall I begin assigning personnel?”

“Do,” said Megatron. “How soon can we move?”

“Within twelve megacycles,” said Strika. “The diversionary force will depart four megacycles after that. You will need to make yourselves very obvious indeed.” She looked back down at the map. The diversionary force would be attacking a small Autobot outpost, understaffed but still of strategic value.

The real target lay deeper in Autobot space, the communications hub for the entire sector. But attacking the outpost would likely draw Autobot forces away from the larger base.

“We’ll label your offensive the main offensive, and mine the diversion until we both undergo long-range communications blackout,” said Strika. “We’ll also let it be known my goal is a different outpost, not New Praxus itself.”

“Good,” said Optimus. “I don’t know how thoroughly Autobot Intelligence has infiltrated our ranks, but I know Jazz. He’s good at his job.”

“If only we could persuade him to defect,” said Ratchet. “He’s a good mech. Unfortunately, being a good mech is not mutually exclusive with being an idiot.”

“Twelve megacycles,” said Strika. “Let’s be about it, people.”

## Chapter 33

Battles *never* went better than expected.

At least so Optimus thought.

But the outpost in question, B-29X, had little infrastructure geared toward repelling a full Decepticon attack, just a handful of mobile defense platforms and a lot of very determined Autobots. The reinforcements—considerable reinforcements, considering the size of the outpost—had arrived half a megacycle into the fight, but the handful of Autobot frigates were no match for a Decepticon command ship and its attendant fleet, and most had struck their colors in the first two megacycles of combat. At that point, Optimus and Megatron had looked at each other and decided to take the outpost anyway.

No one had bothered to update the command codes of those platforms, either, and so here he was being ferried between the defense platforms, disabling them with as little damage as possible.

This one wasn't going well at all.

Firstly, his jetpack had been damaged, stranding him on the platform. Secondly, some bright spark down there had decided to take out the platform in question before it could be turned on its defenders. A good solution. A very good solution. That bot deserved a promotion, but right now Optimus wished someone would knock whoever it was over the helm before he, Optimus, plunged to his deactivation. None of his team were big enough to carry him off the platform without serious difficulty, and they'd make a big target.

The platform bucked as someone landed on the other side. "GET OFF, YOU IDIOT," Optimus yelled.

Megatron's amused snort was audible over the scream of stressed antigrav units and blasterfire. "Heard you were having trouble, Autobot."

This was humiliating. "Yes," said Optimus, cursing his painful honesty.

Megatron inched around the central body of the platform, moving with a care completely at odds with his smirk. "So I gather. And your wings are clipped."

"A stabilizer was damaged," said Optimus. Megatron using Earth idiom was nothing short of enraging.

"Do you trust me, Optimus?"

Optimus looked down at the crumbling battle platform. One of the antigrav units failed, sending it lurching under their stabilizers. "I'm not sure I have a choice."

"True," said Megatron. "Hold on." A massive arm wrapped around Optimus, pulling him off his stabilizers and tight in to Megatron's side. He caught at Megatron's shoulder and clung to his axe with the other servo. Megatron looked down at him with a grin and took three running strides off the bucking platform and into the air.

Optimus tightened his grip convulsively and shut his optics as they dropped. Somehow he didn't yelp. Megatron laughed and activated his thrusters with a roar, drawing his sword with his free servo.

Optimus looked down at the swooping world beneath them and immediately regretted it. Oh, certainly, he'd enjoyed flying when it was under his own power! Clinging to someone else was entirely different.

*"It's all right,"* Megatron sent over comms. *"Even if you lost your grip, I would not drop you."*

*"I want my jetpack back,"* sent Optimus.

*"I can be your jetpack."*

Optimus looked up at him, startled, and Megatron grinned. *"If you so desire."*

Was he...flirting? Or joking? Optimus opted not to respond, but the big hot frame pressed against him was eliciting what he was pretty sure was an entirely inappropriate response in certain subsystems. Some programming glitch with his battle protocols.

*You'll need a shuttle,* Megatron observed, and went into a dive. This time Optimus did yelp. His grip tightened convulsively, but Megatron was intent on his target, and there was a good chance he hadn't noticed, thank Primus.

They landed on the roof of a particularly active Autobot shuttle, and Megatron put his cannon to the roof and melted his way through. No one within was smart enough to use the grapplers as Optimus had done when Megatron had tried a similar trick on Omega.

Whoever it was had at least the presence of mind to shoot at them. Megatron leapt down anyway, shielding Optimus with his frame, and returned fire exactly once. There was a scream; the bot who'd been firing at them fell back with most of her arm gone.

A general clatter as the rest of the shuttle's occupants surrendered. There were three of them, one pilot and two soldiers; Optimus elbowed the pilot away from the controls and took over while Megatron herded them into a corner.

"Stasis cuffs are in the right upper storage compartment," Optimus called back at him. "No more offlining."

Irritated sigh. "Of course."

Optimus looked out the viewscreen again. He'd have to trust Megatron, because the other Autobot shuttles around them had noticed their companion's fate.

It didn't help the shuttle handled like what the humans called a roller skate. He touched the controls and it leapt in response. He gritted his dentae and hung on. Frag, piloting this thing would be enough of a servoful, forget weapons.

The wounded bot screeched. "Do you want to leak out?" snapped Megatron. "You're welcome to if you'd like. Less trouble for me."

Optimus would have made a comment, but two other shuttles converged on them, and he had to throw them into a steep dive. The inertial dampeners held, at least.

"Prisoners secured," said Megatron, climbing into the copilot's seat. "The injury has been patched; I doubted you'd thank me for any unnecessarily snuffed sparks."

"Take over weapons," said Optimus. "Hopefully they're better than the steering."

"My pleasure," said Megatron, and sounded like he meant it. Frag. Optimus hoped he wouldn't regret that. He brought the shuttle around to face their pursuers, and Megatron opened fire.

One of Slipstream's squadrons came in through the gap the shuttles had opened, streaked past them toward the command tower.

"Bring us around," said Megatron. "We'll provide artillery support."

Above them, the Autobot line broke and fell back.

---

Strika pressed herself hard against the bulkhead and swore. Easy enough to bring down the air support, but the maze of corridors of New Praxus was a different thing entirely.

Her comm crackled. *"General Strika, ma'am, Smokescreen reporting. We just took the generators. We rerouted everything from Security. They're cut off and we have control of the systems."*

"Good job," said Strika. "Zap anyone in Security, Autobot controlled areas and the skirmishes in Beta through Epsilon corridors. Stasis now, sort later."

*"Yes ma'am,"* said Smokescreen, altogether too happy with that. Good little Decepticon. One wondered how she'd managed with the Autobots for so long. Strika poked her helm out into the corridor, pulled it back fast as a cloud of blasterbolts responded. This lot, she'd deal with herself.

---

There weren't enough dead bots to justify this much energon and oil. Optimus was thoroughly slimed, and attempting to clean himself off by scraping a servo over his plating only got his servos dirtier. He ached. He ached more than he ever had in his function.

Earth had been different. For all the terror of facing Megatron alone, it had been better, terrifying but at least honorable. This was work, for all it ended people's functions.

At least it was over. The Autobot commander was brought to them, a young mech barely past his final upgrades, looking very small and angry in war frame grade stasis cuffs--stasis cuffs that were currently offline, given the discrepancy between their parameters and the bot they confined. He stared at them with wide blue optics, then spat on the decking at their stabilizers. "Traitorous scum," he snarled, servos clenching futilely in the cuffs. "You sold us out, and for what, so you could get a good spiking?"

Optimus glanced at Megatron, who simply looked back at him with an expression of polite interest. He squared his shoulders and turned to face the prisoner, hid his flinch at the betrayal and malice in the younger bot's optics. "Our medics are attending to your wounded," he said. "If any of your personnel are medically qualified, we'll want their assistance. You took heavy casualties during the battle, and we don't want any unnecessary offlinings."

"So you can have more 'face toys? Frag you, we know what Decepticons do to prisoners! My bots are under orders not to give assistance."

"Your bots are dying," said Optimus. He felt very cold, and the core of him curled tight, a wound spring. His servos clenched, and his words came hard and precise. "They followed you and trusted you, and you'll kill them, just like that? Because you're more afraid of what we'll do to them? Or because you're afraid of what'll happen if Sentinel decides you're a Decepticon collaborator?"

"That's Sentinel Magnus to you, scum!" But there was uncertainty in the bot's voice.

"You will be treated ethically," said Optimus.

"Shuttlescrap," snarled the bot, and Optimus took two strides forward, stopped himself before he seized the bot by the collar fairing. The bot cringed anyway.

"Your fears are one thing," he said, still with that terrible coldness. "But not when they endanger your command." He looked up at the Decepticon guards. "Confine him and the rest of the command staff separately from the other prisoners. I will speak to the others myself."

Megatron waited until the bot had been escorted out of the room before speaking. "You think they'll be more cooperative than him?" he asked, sounding thoughtful.

"I'll hope so," said Optimus. "Our medical staff are limited; we don't even have Ratchet here. We'll need their help if we can possibly get it. And," he allowed his voice to shade grimmer, "we'll need to figure out what to do with our prisoners."

---

Ratchet staggered out of surgery. Everyone else had finished with the battle ten megacycles ago, which at least meant no new casualties. The medical staff still had their work cut out for them.

Heh, cut. He rubbed his optics. Frag, he was terrible-puns exhausted. Not a good sign. Whatever else might be said about Shockwave, he had some good instincts; he'd shoed Ratchet away from the operating slab before Ratchet himself had realized how tired he was.

Speaking of scraplets, here came Shockwave, just as grimed as he was, cleaning his claws off. "That is the last of them," he said. "We can leave the nursing to the rest of the staff; General Strika has informed me she's directing all trained personnel here, and Thundercracker tells me that he's perfectly capable of managing the sickbay in our absence."

"Thanks," said Ratchet, eying a nearby open patch of decking. It looked pretty comfortable.

"Strika informs me that you had better recharge in your own berth," said Shockwave.

Ratchet waved a servo at him. "Well, she'll have to come see about that herself, then. Right now, recharge. I'll be here if anyone needs me."

The floor was just as comfortable as he'd thought. And two megacycles later, Strika showed up, servos on hips, glaring. Ratchet insisted on checking her for damage before he allowed himself to be carried off to berth. What could he say? It was sweet of her, and being gruffly fussed over by a Decepticon killing machine had its charm. Maybe when he wasn't so tired he might inquire as to whether that interest went any further...

## Chapter 34

The Decepticon fleet reconvened at New Praxus, after leaving a cursory detail at B29-X, with orders to flee rather than defend the planet. Mecha were more valuable than holding that world.

The senior command, after the requisite greetings, settled down around the conference table and looked at each other.

“There is the matter of the prisoners,” said Megatron. “We don’t have the mecha to guard them. I need suggestions.”

“It’s unlikely that the Autobots will be willing to do a prisoner exchange,” said Ratchet. “No negotiating with terrorists, and all that.”

“No executions,” said Optimus, quickly.

“We could use them as experimental subjects,” said Shockwave.

The entire table turned to look at him. His antennae were pricked up in a disturbingly hopeful attitude. There was a distinct, lengthily silence.

“No,” said Ratchet, once he got the horrified threads of his processor working in the same direction again. “Oh frag no.”

“Shockwave,” said Strika, her voice cold, “do you take active pleasure in being a spike casing, or do you not consider half the words you queue for your vocalizer?”

Shockwave’s antennae drooped. “But it might give us the information we need to repair the Seekers,” he said.

“No,” said Ratchet again, instantly. He glanced down the table. Slipstream met his optics briefly, then looked down at her servos, faceplate blank. “No. We’re not doing that. We’ll manage without, dammit.”

“I concur,” said Megatron. “There is certainly honor in battle, but not in torturing and slaughtering mecha who have no chance of escape. That is an Autobot thing.”

“It is not,” said Optimus, optics blazing. “That is not what it means to be Autobot. That is the behavior of Sentinel’s regime, not what we stand for. There will be no executions, or experiments, or hacking, am I clear?” He stood, leaning his servos on the conference table, and met everyone’s optics in turn. “I have an idea.”

“Well,” said Megatron, leaning back, and was that a considering light in his optics, something like amusement and maybe admiration? Ratchet wasn’t sure. “Let’s hear it.”

“We release them,” said Optimus.

Pandemonium. Even Shockwave joined in the protest. Everyone except for Ratchet and Megatron seemed to be on their stabilizers and yelling, all at the same time. The amusement had gone right out of Megatron’s expression; he narrowed his optics and watched Optimus, very still. There was something unsettling, not predatory, but not good, in that consideration. Ratchet felt his plating rise. It wasn’t something he’d ever want directed at him.

Optimus offlined his optics and waited until people finished yelling, then looked up at them. “I

understand your reservations,” he said. “But I was a member of the Elite Guard, and let me assure you, if I or my command had been captured and then voluntarily released by the Decepticons, our careers would have ended. At the least, we would have spent several orns under intensive questioning to determine whether we had been somehow compromised, and I would have stood trial to determine whether I’d been incompetent or cowardly in surrendering. At the most, we would have all been arrested for aiding and abetting the enemy.”

“You’re saying Sentinel will make them take the fall.”

“That’s exactly what I’m saying,” said Optimus. “And they know it. So if we offer them their freedom, there’s a good chance we’ll never see them again. There’s also a good chance that if we offer them a choice between freedom and joining, the bulk will elect to join.”

“And what if they decide to get back into Sentinel’s good graces by taking advantage of our mercy?” Megatron looked over his steepled digits at Optimus, still with that considering expression.

“We won’t be stupid about it,” said Optimus. “We’ll use the damaged shuttles. We can tow those out into neutral space with their distress beacons. It’ll be better still if we can put them all into stasis first.”

“It’s a lot of effort for a showy act of mercy,” said Megatron.

“Less than confining them.” Optimus glared at him. “And sometimes, inexplicable mercy can be more confusing and demoralizing than cruelty.”

“True,” said Megatron. “And you’re certain we won’t see any of them on the front lines again?”

“I can’t be certain,” said Optimus, “But I doubt the Elite Guard has changed *that* much.”

“Strika?”

“It’s unconventional, my lord, but bears consideration. At the least, they won’t be our helmache anymore.”

“True.”

“Let me talk to them first,” said Optimus. “They’ll listen to me.”

“What about spies?” said Shockwave. “There may be spies.”

“We’ll screen them, the same as the refugees,” said Optimus. “Besides, no one will expect us to be doing this.”

“Slagged right,” muttered someone.

“By all means,” said Megatron, “do talk to them.” He grinned. “It worked with the medics, after all.”

“Thank you,” said Optimus, gravely, and with that the conversation moved on to other subjects.

---

Well after the last of the strategic considerations had been debated into the decking, Strika and Megatron met up alone in the privacy of Megatron’s quarters. This was by no means unusual—many of the most sensitive nuances of strategy had been debated here—but the first time they’d done so since Megatron’s disappearance on Earth.

Strika looked at him over the small, long-broken holotable. Its original purpose had been to allow the ship’s commander to be updated on the tactical situation at any time, on duty or off, but now it was a



place to put cubes and datapads. “So. What is it?”

“I am deeply disturbed,” said Megatron, and slumped ever-so-slightly.

“Care to tell me why?”

“He is so much like Terminus,” said Megatron. “So very like. Sometimes he sounds the same, when he’s being morally superior. His cadences are the same. It is profoundly disturbing, and I do not like it!”

“How so?” Oh Primus, this was too good. She kept the amusement off her faceplate. What *had* the little Autobot gotten up to during that battle?

“He is not Terminus. I refuse to project a past relationship onto a mech who wasn’t even online when Terminus deactivated. He’s tiny, he’s young, he’s a complete twit—”

“And oh so very good at his job,” purred Strika, enjoying this far more than she should. “A good leader. Careful of his people, and possessed of an idealistic moral code that puts both of ours to shame in terms of sheer impracticality. Intelligent, too. He did beat you. And all this wrapped up in the prettiest red-and-blue plating you’ve ever seen, and the finest aft Autobot military design has ever produced.”

Megatron stared at her. To her absolute delight, she saw the edges of his faceplate flush with energon.

“I am not having an affair purely because of,” and the quotation marks were audible, tongs around a corroded oil pan, “‘a fine aft’.”

“Aren’t you a stiff old crankcase,” said Strika. “Romantic.”

“Mutual respect, shared ideals, and comparable intelligence, yes,” said Megatron. “*A fine aft—!*”

“Is for most people sufficient qualification,” said Strika. “I think he fulfills your other conditions as well, though I do wonder why the fine aft was the only one of those qualifications I listed that you heard, my lord.”

“I’m sure he’s uninterested,” said Megatron, quickly. “He was revolted by the mention of an intimate relationship. Utterly revolted. I will make no presumptions.”

Strika sobered immediately. “Of course,” she said. “Only if you’re both interested. At least we’ve established that you are.”

“Primus below, you had better not talk to him. He’ll swear to celibacy.”

Strika gave her lord a profoundly dirty look. “You should have confidence in your commanders, Lord Megatron,” she said.

“Not when it comes to my personal life. Need I remind you of the results last time?”

“For the record, my lord, I have not the slightest clue of how that Autobot got into your quarters before we apprehended him, and all the items he attempted to steal were restored to you.”

Megatron just looked at her.

“In all sincerity, Lord Megatron, I think that, if conducted properly, this would strengthen the alliance,” said Strika. “It would have to be handled very, very carefully, of course. But from the

Decepticon point of view, you and Optimus having an affair would greatly increase confidence in his place in this alliance. If he's good enough for Lord Megatron, and if Lord Megatron is willing to trust him even in berth, why would they challenge that? He defied you, successfully; there's not the slightest question in my processor that he's good enough to be your mate. The only issue is the Autobot view of things, and only he and Ratchet can make that judgement; I don't know what goes on in their processors well enough to know how they'd react to that."

"It seems to be a pressing Autobot concern," said Megatron. "The foolish commander we captured taunted Optimus, implying that the reason he defected was an affection for my spike."

"That says better things for your spike than his morals," said Strika. "But you realize that recognizing him as a mate would give him certain legal rights over the Decepticons."

"I don't want a sparkbond."

"Yes, I know," said Strika. "Still, consider that. It would place him in greater authority and bring the AFF onto equal standing with us. I'm sure Ratchet would see that, at the least."

Megatron frowned at her. "I don't like the idea of intimacy as a bargaining chip. It reeks of Autobot morality."

"So it does," said Strika. "Perhaps you two should simply negotiate things yourselves, and fret about these concerns later, if such need arises."

"Better," said Megatron.

"I simply wanted to assure you that you wouldn't be forsaking your duty by thinking with your interface drives."

"Very comforting, general," said Megatron.

"And if it helps, Terminus would likely whack you upside the helm for overthinking this. If the little Autobot is interested, by all means, court him."

Megatron sighed heavily, but not without a measure of amusement. "Go," he said. "Both of us need recharge."

---

Frag, the kid was good.

Ratchet watched him move through the Autobot prisoners, stopping and talking, calm and reasonable and above all kind, and shook his helm. From people's expressions, they were going to have those new recruits after all.

Well, some of them. One small, youngish mech lunged at Optimus, who sidestepped as if he'd been expecting that. He bent his helm again and went back to talking, just as reasonable as ever.

"I can't believe it," said a voice next to him.

"Hello Chromia," Ratchet said. "It's been a while."

Chromia snorted. "We'll be going back to Caminus," she said. "And I can't believe it. What the frag does the little glitch think he's doing?"

"Recruiting," said Ratchet. "Making new friends. You know, the usual things you do around strange new mecha—since when are you going back to Caminus?"

“Certain people are twitchy about their favorite acolytes running about unsupervised,” said Chromia. “Certain favorite acolytes believe anything they’re told and will obey with a snap of the digits.”

“I knew I missed talking to you. You’re so stunningly clear and communicative.”

“Of course. Does he seriously think he can convert them? They were trying to blow us up this morning.”

“It’s Optimus, he believes the best of everyone.”

“Windblade wants to make an alliance with him if no one else,” said Chromia. “She thinks we can trust him.”

“Oh certainly, you can,” said Ratchet. “If he’s ever in a position where he’s allowed to make the rules.”

“Point taken.”

“So why are you headed back?”

“The Mistress of the Flame summoned us,” said Chromia. “Specifically, Windblade.”

“Oh? And who’s this Mistress of the Flame?”

“Only the center of our people.”

“Ah. And you’re not happy about this.”

“I have my misgivings.” Ratchet gave her an inquiring look. “None that I’d speak of to outsiders. But yes, we’ll be leaving.”

“A pity,” said Ratchet. “We were getting along so well.”

“Indeed. Did he just make that mech cry? The one who tried to kill him?”

Ratchet looked back at Optimus. “I suppose so. The weaponized guilt trip has always been one of Optimus’s specialties.”

“Keep Windblade away from him, she doesn’t need to get any better at that.” Chromia shivered.

“Your plating still sore from that scolding she gave you?”

“Oh yes,” said Chromia. “Very sore.”

“My spark just aches.”

“I’m sure it does. In any case, I wanted to say goodbye. Hopefully we’ll be back. It depends on what people think about what Windblade has to say. And good luck.”

“Thanks,” said Ratchet, turning his attention back. Optimus was moving again. “We can always use that.”

---

Optimus sank back into his berth with a sparkfelt groan, stretched out, and fell directly into recharge.

He was on a comfortable berth, that he could tell from the faint give under his shins and stabilizers, and there was hot, humming metal under his servos, the heady scent of flightframe fuel and clean oil. His valve stretched, electric pleasure, around the heat of a spike much larger than his own. It felt

good, good in a way interface hardly ever was for him.

He rocked his hips, and the mech under him moaned, Megatron's voice, followed by a faint staticky plea for more. Megatron's red optics were narrowed with pleasure, his intake open as he panted, and the open vulnerability there sent a new bolt of arousal through him. Optimus lifted himself, pushed back down, biting the edge of his intake to muffle his own cry.

Megatron's claws moved, twining around the thin chain that bound his servos over his helm. He could have broken those easily, if he'd been so minded. But the flex and curl of his claws on them showed he enjoyed them, enjoyed this, was here for the simple pleasure of such surrender, and with that realization, Optimus began to move, reveling in the cries he dragged from the mech under him.

He came awake slowly, bolted up when he realized his panels were open and his valve wet. Memories of the dream returned, and he groaned. He hadn't even known his processor was capable of coming up with such a lurid, debauched scenario. Unnatural. Valve mecha submitted to their partners, not the other way around, and what sort of weird bot used chains on his partner—why had his processor shown Megatron, of all mecha, enjoying the restraints?

He wasn't going to be able to look Megatron in the optics for a while, that was for sure.

## Chapter 35

Optimus watched the long range scanner as the Autobot Elite Guard ship came in to ‘rescue’ the three shuttles of released prisoners, and ex-vented heavily. As stupid as they’d been in choosing to go back, he felt badly for consigning them to such a fate.

But they knew too. And they’d chosen it over being able to make their way as neutrals, or joining the AFF. He supposed he ought to admire them for their commitment, their loyalty, but that loyalty was exactly what had murdered Smokescreen’s team, and so many civilians.

“It worked,” said Ratchet. “And we’ve got new recruits for it. Good thinking, kid.”

“They might die for this.”

“And they’ve killed for it, too,” said Ratchet. “Possibly even civilians.”

“But possibly not.”

“But we couldn’t take care of them.”

“I know,” said Optimus. “I just...I just hope that they don’t go through what I did.”

A servo patted his shoulder. “You can’t save them all, kid. Especially not the idealistic ones.”

Optimus’s intake twisted in a small, bitter smile. “Speaking from experience?”

“Yes,” said Ratchet. “By the way, I have a report to make. Thundercracker requests reassignment. He’d like to fly patrols, if at all possible.”

“You said his wings—”

“Jetpacks aren’t just for Autobots now,” said Ratchet, grinning. “It was even easier because he came with built-in wings. Honestly, it’s more of a prosthetic than a jetpack; the only difference between it and his original flight capabilities is that he controls it manually instead of mentally. Thank you, by the way, for trashing your old pack; it was what gave me the idea. The vocalizer will take longer, though. For the meantime, he’s stuck with speaking hand.”

“Good,” said Optimus. His smile was genuine this time. “What about the others?”

“Unless I can make prosthetic bits of processor, we have no really good news,” said Ratchet. “Found a better drug for Skywarp that treats most of the anxiety. He’s severely neurotic but nearly functional, instead of screaming and thrashing whenever he’s online, so it’s an improvement. No change in anyone else.”

“Have you told Slipstream?”

“Yes. She’s spending her available time with them. Be nice to her, would you? I think she’s not happy Windblade and company left.”

“Why?” Optimus frowned at him, perplexed.

“She was interested in Windblade,” said Ratchet, cheerfully. “It might have been returned. It would be quite good if it was. Alliances are built on personal connections—what did I say?”

His faceplate was flushed, wasn't it. Optimus wanted to crawl under the decking with utterly absurd embarrassment. "Nothing. I'll keep it in mind. Anything else?"

"Arcee and Omega contacted us. They'll be joining us in about half an orn or so."

"Good!" Optimus placed a servo on Ratchet's shoulder, well aware he was still blushing. "Thank you, Ratchet. Now, if you'll excuse me, I need to meet with Megatron."

"Oh?" said Ratchet, and smirked. "What for?"

Here came the blush again, and it brought reinforcements. "Sparring," he said, keeping his voice as normal as he could. "It's good practice." Never mind that this was the first time. "And ah, builds trust." There, that sounded right, professional. Right?

Oh Primus, Ratchet's smirk had only gotten worse. "Have fun with that."

Optimus tried an authoritative glare, but those didn't work so well while blushing. He gave up and nodded correctly at Ratchet, and then fled to the sparring match in question. At least there were limited—and far more tolerable!—ways to get embarrassed while sparring! He'd take getting dumped on his aft any day over whatever this was.

---

"It's working," said Ratchet. Strika looked sidelong at him. That smirk should be classified as a harbinger of universe-wide devastation. Strika, who hardly could be said to have even a passing relationship with innocence at the best of times, was nevertheless shocked that a bot could manage to look so very...not innocent.

"What's working?" she said, propping her chin on a servo and looking at him over her desk and the reams of datapads intelligence produced.

"Megatron and Optimus," said Ratchet.

Oh, this was good. "Go on."

"You should have seen Optimus blush. He's interested. Did you know they're sparring?"

Strika looked back at the pads, feigning indifference. "All that will do is teach Optimus new angles of Megatron's duplicity."

"You've been reading those too long. You're starting to sound like them."

"Frag you, medic."

That smirk grew. "Anytime you'd like, General."

Their optics met.

"Really?" said Strika, after a moment.

"I'm only serious if you're interested," he said. "If not, that's a tasteless joke I won't repeat."

"Perhaps," she said, looking him over. Most of her processor already was occupied with the mental image of fragging the medic in a mess of datapads. "I assume you'll make the necessary arrangements?"

"We've recruited a few competent medics, yes," said Ratchet. "If I step aside from being your

primary physician, we no longer have a conflict with medical ethics, and you have quite a choice when it comes to a replacement.”

“Do what you must for your conscience,” said Strika. “You know our fraternization regulations—”

“Don’t exist?”

“Yes. Well. You did your research.” She leaned back and grinned. He looked as if he were contemplating hiking himself up on the desk, though Primus alone knew where, with all the datapads.

And then her comms screamed to life. “*General Strika, sir,*” said Slipstream, “*We have bad news. We need you up here right away. It’s one of our spies.*”

---

Megatron snarled and lunged, but Optimus was ready for him. A quick hop back carried him out of Megatron’s range. He darted back in, landing a sharp kick to Megatron’s abdominal plating. Megatron grunted and doubled over, and Optimus kned him under the chin—or tried to, because Megatron caught his stabilizer and yanked it out from under him. He rolled, heard Megatron grunt as the next blow completely missed, and got to his stabilizers again. Before Megatron could recover, Optimus threw himself into a flying tackle, landing spreadeagled on Megatron’s back. He wrapped his stabilizers tightly around Megatron’s waist, and caught Megatron under the chin in a chokehold, only to find that the shape of Megatron’s helm prevented that from being effective at all. He bashed Megatron in the helm instead, but by the way Megatron laughed, it wasn’t very effective.

Megatron got up. The plane of his back went from horizontal to vertical, and without the aid of gravity, the ridge of armor that formed the top of his alt mode became a very difficult thing indeed to hold onto. Optimus tightened his grip and held on. A glance over his shoulder confirmed the ground to be a disconcerting distance down.

Didn’t the humans have a saying involving tigers and tails? Optimus gulped, hard, and wondered how to get down. If this was a real battle, he’d be slag. All Megatron had to do was fall over backwards, and crush him to spare parts.

Megatron chuckled, sending vibrations through his entire frame—and by extension, Optimus. Optimus’s optics widened, and he was suddenly aware of Megatron’s plating pressed up against his. Not that anything was trying to online yet, good, but if only he could remove his stabilizers from Megatron’s waist, that would mean that...certain parts...were not in direct contact with the large warm expanse of Megatron’s back.

“Do you need me to let you down, little Autobot?” The large, warm, vibrating with every word expanse of Megatron’s back. Oh frag. Optimus squeezed his optics shut. This was definitely the most embarrassing moment of his life. At least his interface systems weren’t pinging him yet, but given the fact that he’d been *dreaming* about Megatron in less than decent ways, it wouldn’t be long. Frag. Either that or it would stop being awkward once he stopped thinking about it, which meant this whole thing was his fault.

“Yes,” he managed. Frag, asking Megatron to *let him down* was the least embarrassing option. Frag everything.

Megatron chuckled again. Oh no. There it was. One of his fans was trying to online. Oh frag, oh no. What the frag kind of mech got revved up by this? This was really unfair to Megatron, who probably didn’t even know what was going on. No, no, no, don’t you dare online...

Megatron shifted and bent, and Optimus looked over his shoulder, began to unhook his stabilizers...

*Click.*

*Whirr.*

Optimus dropped off of Megatron's back well before he meant to, landing flat on his aft. The impact at least sent a different signal to his systems, and the fan went off just as abruptly as it had come on. He let out a long vent of relief. A long vent that got rid of a good bit of the buildup of hot air.

He scrambled to his stabilizers. Had Megatron noticed? He hoped not.

Megatron turned and grinned down at him, offered a servo. After a moment, Optimus accepted it.

"Shall we continue?"

"Sure." He tried to sound nonchalant. *As long as my stupid systems stop trying to do things they shouldn't!*

Megatron stepped back, didn't even bother to settle into a guard position. "Well. Come on, then."

Optimus lunged, Megatron moved in, and they grappled. As long as he could keep Megatron from catching hold of him, they were on fairly equal footing. Megatron wasn't used to fighting someone so much smaller, though he was adjusting. Optimus wormed out of one bearhug, put a knee somewhere very uncomfortable—Megatron went *oof*—and wrapped a grappling cable around Megatron's wrists. It wasn't playing fair, strictly speaking, but he didn't care.

Megatron made an abrupt movement, looping the cable over Optimus's shoulders and pulling it tight with a jerk. Optimus squeaked as he was pulled in close.

And the fragging fan went on again.

There was no mistaking it this time, and the acute embarrassment meant it was several seconds before Optimus even *located* the fragging codes to switch it off. He was never going to be able to look Megatron in the optics again!

His fan went off. But the quiet whirr persisted. Optimus reset his optics. Definitely a cooling fan. Definitely not his.

"I apologize," said Megatron, sounding somewhat strangled. "It was not my intent..." The fan went off.

"It wasn't mine, either," said Optimus.

They stared at each other, not moving.

Megatron's comms went off.

"Yes?" he said. Then, "On my way."

He looked down at Optimus. "We'll have to get ourselves unwound," he said.

"Er, right," said Optimus, and tried to shift his shoulders to dislodge the cable. It didn't work. Megatron's fans came back on. His weren't far behind.

The helpless laugh bubbled up in the back of his intake before he could stop it. It wasn't even a



laugh. It was a giggle. He quashed it at the last moment, which only made it short and even more awkward.

*Some diplomat I make, he thought, looking up at Megatron. Forget earlier. This is the most embarrassing moment of my entire function.*

But Megatron was grinning too. “Just hold still,” he said. “We don’t want this to become any more absurd.”

“Right,” said Optimus, and held still while Megatron unlooped the cables from around his shoulders, then leaned forward to undo the cables around his wrists.

And dropped a kiss on the edge of his nasal ridge, right between his optics.

---

“Report,” barked Megatron as soon as they arrived on the bridge.

“Slipstream just heard from one of our spies,” said Strika. She looked at Optimus and Ratchet. “We would have ignored it, but we know how the AFF’s leadership has become concerned with Earth.”

Ratchet’s tanks dropped. Oh no.

“Twelve megacycles ago, energon was found on Earth.”

“Oh no,” said Optimus softly, and Ratchet saw a mirror of his own alarm in his optics. “Oh no.”

## Chapter 36

### Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“We have to defend Earth.”

Idealistic crankcase. Strika pinched the nasal guard of her helm and *glared* at Optimus around her fingers. At least Megatron was also glaring. She wasn’t sure if she’d be able to resist the urge to space the both of them if that had happened. “In case you didn’t notice, we are fighting a war,” she said.

“I will not allow Earth to become a casualty of our war,” said Optimus. “I doubt Sentinel will be particularly ethical about his mining procedures. He may just decide to sanitize the entire planet before commencing operations.”

“They’ll be fine,” snarled Megatron. “Sanitizing the planet would be too expensive.”

“I don’t think you understand how much *Sentinel hates organics*, Megatron.” Optimus matched both their glares and then some. If he hadn’t been an Autobot, he probably would have punctuated that with a growl. “We can’t let them get that energon, and we can’t let them destroy Earth, which they *will*. We’re trained to fear organics, and most good Autobots hate them just as much as Sentinel.”

“I’m not so fond of them either,” said Megatron, optics narrowed. His servos were clenched so hard on the table they trembled.

“I know,” said Optimus, looked away. “But it’s still the right thing to do.”

Megatron looked at Strika, frowning, in obvious need of advice.

“The Autobots getting that much energon will be devastating to the Decepticon Cause,” Strika said. Megatron’s optics flicked back to Optimus, and Strika stifled the urge to comm him with *no, don’t you dare make this a courting gift, you idiot, I thought you had some passing familiarity with diplomacy*, because something about the set of his frame alarmed her.

“We can warn them,” he said. “But the bulk of our forces must remain here.”

“Of course,” said Optimus. “But we need to send at least one warship to Earth.”

Strika reset her vocalizer before that glaring could turn into anything truly unfortunate. “I will remain here with the bulk of our military forces,” she said. “We can detach the *Victory* and a quarter of her division—the frigates *Surprise* and *Lively*, and their attendants. I’ll spare you the *Polychrest*.”

“Don’t,” said Megatron. “We’ll take *Polychrest*. Better us than you, and if all goes badly indeed we can set her on a collision course with the Autobots and be rid of two problems at once.”

“*Polychrest*?” said Optimus.

“An experimental ship with experimental weaponry that was a lovely demonstration of why not to create experimental ships with experimental weaponry,” said Strika. “One of old Megazarak’s little jokes.”

Several of the Decepticon officers made as if they meant to spit, and thought better of it. The little

Autobot looked confused, though Ratchet pressed a servo over his intake. Strika still heard the snicker.

“*Polychrest* is still moderately functional,” Megatron said. “She can carry troops, at the least. Besides, as long as we keep *Surprise*, we can compensate somewhat for her failings.”

Optimus nodded. “I think troops will matter more than naval power,” he said. “Particularly with our larger numbers of flyers. A smaller force will also allay human suspicions about our intentions. Namely, whether we’re planning to take over the planet ourselves, something that they’ve had good cause to suspect in the past.” Oh, and there it was, a real glare leveled at Megatron. It was kind of cute, really. Like, as Ratchet would put it, a goldfish trying to savage someone. Strika had no clue what a goldfish looked like, but she had a pretty firm general idea given Optimus’s repertoire of fairly endearing meaningful looks.

It wasn’t so much size as that something in Strika’s processor kept trying to reclassify him as an archivist or something similarly useless.

“As long as it keeps the humans happy,” said Megatron, sounding less than happy about it himself.

“Good,” said Optimus. “We don’t want *any* repeats of last time.”

“Of course not.” You had to give him credit, he seemed perfectly unconcerned with Megatron looming at him. Strika knew Decepticons twice his size who would have been hiding under the table at that expression. Was this that idiot’s idea of flirting? No; Megatron’s irritation seemed perfectly genuine.

“I’ll make the preparations,” she said quickly. “You select personnel and work on the specifics. I’ll have a plan for the rest of the sector—and the advancement of this front—by the end of the shift, Lord Megatron.”

“Thank you, General,” said Megatron, and returned to glaring at Optimus.

“Dismissed,” said Strika to everyone else, and, deciding that if the two of them were planning to offline each other in her absence, they’d just have to sort it out themselves, left them to it.

---

Frag. Megatron looked—was the impolite human term *pissed off*? Optimus thought so, having heard Sari use the phrase in context, and then be scolded by her father for her language. At least he was used to being glared at like that by Megatron.

“Look,” he said, “I know you don’t like it, but if the Autobots get that energon, we’re fra—we’re in a lot of trouble.”

“I know that,” said Megatron.

“You don’t have to come.”

Megatron looked away.

“I know you don’t like humans, either, particularly Professor Sumdac, but we can’t stand by and let the Autobots kill an innocent species!”

“They’re perfectly capable of looking out for themselves,” said Megatron.

“Not against the Elite Guard, they’re not.”

“You’re not going to be able to save every species in the universe,” snapped Megatron. “Why start with *them*?”

“Because they’re in danger. Sentinel would love to offline the entire species, if not to hurt me, then because he hates organics. I think they’re in real and serious danger, and I think you’re being a crankshaft because you’re scared of them too!” Optimus regretted the words as soon as they were out of his vocalizer, even before Megatron’s optics slitted and the Decepticon growled, a low threat that made Optimus feel human-sized. Oh frag. When had he gotten so comfortable around Megatron that he’d forgotten that the Decepticon was, well, a Decepticon, and all but a living weapon? A living, ancient, above all *pissed off* weapon looming down at him?

“I despise them,” said Megatron. “I do not *fear* them.”

“Too bad,” snapped Optimus. “I’m helping them. If you’re going to stay back here with Strika—”

Megatron bared his dentae. “I will come with you,” he said. “To make sure that you’re not an utter fool, and do not forget your loyalties to your people when confronted with human needs.”

“Don’t you dare treat me like a protoform.”

“Maybe if you stopped acting like one, I might consider that.”

Optimus stared at him, taken aback by the injustice of that statement. “I am not acting like a protoform. Even Strika agrees that the Autobots can’t be allowed to obtain that energon.”

“And that will be why we’re going,” said Megatron. “Not to defend your favorite species.”

“We’re going to do both,” snapped Optimus. “You do not give me orders.”

“You do not give *me* orders,” snarled Megatron, and they glared at each other again.

“Well, I guess that’s settled.”

“Yes, it is. What about personnel?”

At least *that* promised to be a productive argument. Optimus let out a vent of relief.

---

Two days later, the small Decepticon fleet assigned to Earth settled into orbit. Optimus and Ratchet took a shuttle down, on Optimus’s insistence that they be the ones to talk to Professor Sumdac and the other Earth authorities; the last time Megatron had turned up, he’d done so with the full intention of destroying the planet, and Optimus said privately to Ratchet that he had no wish to further strain Megatron’s already brittle temper.

“Smart kid,” said Ratchet.

“I wish he’d stop *lecturing me*,” said Optimus. “Yes, I understand that Decepticons and Autobots are different, could he stop blaming every single difference of opinion on that?”

“It’s probably second nature to him, kid. Not sure if there’s a whole lot you can do about it.”

“I thought *fighting* him was irritating enough,” said Optimus, glaring at the controls as if they were responsible for Megatron’s behavior. “I was wrong.”

Ratchet couldn’t resist tweaking the cybercat’s tail. “Mm. His presence that compelling, kid?”

Optimus made a choking sputtering noise that was extraordinarily satisfying, and showed his processor had gone all the wicked places Ratchet hoped it had.

“They still passing around those absurd ‘facing stories in the academy? You know they’re produced by the propaganda bots, right?” Oh yes, they were. Optimus was shading pinker by the second. It all but reached the tips of his audials. “Because I’m pretty sure that Megatron’s closet of dastardly delights exists only in some intelligence bot’s fevered imagination.”

“Ratchet,” hissed Optimus, and Ratchet couldn’t tell whether it was the idea of said closet, or the fact that he’d quoted verbatim one of the absurd things’ titles, “*shut up.*”

“Shutting up, *sir*,” he said, earned a glare for the tone, and pretended to be completely occupied by the absolutely mundane task of piloting the shuttle to land in the usual, much abused, park. Primus, there was even a ship-shaped patch of dead grass. Energon fumes and the landscaping didn’t get on.

There wasn’t much of a welcoming committee, just a police line to keep curious humans back. The officer in charge of that line informed them that Captain Fanzone, too, was back at Sumdac Tower.

Ratchet had hated Earth. But it was a relief to be back, and it was with a twinge of nostalgia he transformed and started up toward Sumdac Tower. It had certainly been much simpler. And Optimus hadn’t been so desperately unhappy.

He was still miserable, Ratchet could tell. He had a lot of very good reasons for it, of course, but Ratchet privately suspected it was because of his usual complete lack of self-esteem. He’d probably convinced himself the entire venture was doomed to failure simply because he was involved. Someone needed to shake him and remind him he was competent, one of these days. Might work best from Megatron, but the difficulty of convincing Megatron to be helpful...

Lost in thought, the first indication of something going wrong Ratchet had was Optimus’s yelp and the sudden clatter of an involuntary transformation. Then the stasis blast hit him, too, and he jerked out of alt and went flat on his faceplates. The last thing he saw was a pair of stabilizers, and a hooked servo steadying Optimus’s lolling helm as their attacker slid the tip of a syringe into his neck line.

## Chapter End Notes

It should be noted that all the references to the Polychrest are references to a fictional ship with a distinct preference for sailing backward that appears in the novel *Post Captain* by Patrick O'Brian. His *Aubrey* (21 books!) is a spectacular masterpiece, and I highly recommend it to everyone.

## Chapter 37

Optimus came online in darkness. His processor ached, something felt vaguely wrong, and all he wanted to do was recharge. He fought his way up to consciousness anyway, strained to see something in the darkness. He couldn't move, stasis cuffs. His tanks clenched.

The lights flipped on. Heavy pedes crossed around behind him, and his captor came into view.

"Lockdown!" Optimus stared up at the bounty hunter. "I thought you worked for the Decepticons."

"Aw, sweetspark, you've got it all wrong," said Lockdown. "I work for the highest bidder. Which right now would be one Sentinel Prime. You've got quite a price on your helm." The tip of his hook caught Optimus under the chin and forced him to meet Lockdown's optics. "What did you do to torque him off so badly, anyway? They want you alive and everything. Though they didn't say in what condition." His servo brushed Optimus's grapples.

"Get your servo off me," said Optimus, trying only to sound disgusted instead of scared. Oh Primus, it was even the same slab as before! Sentinel was a small and distant dread against the way Lockdown was looking at him, at the grapples—oh no, not again, he couldn't bear to have them ripped away again! His grapples were a part of him, they weren't some mod. He flinched under Lockdown's touch.

Lockdown smirked. "Stop carrying on. I promise I'll be gentle."

"I said, get off me!" Optimus didn't care about the panic in his voice, he couldn't move and Lockdown was grinning down at him, and stroking his digits over his grapples like he already owned it. He vented hard. He couldn't stand the feeling of filled space over him. He was trapped, there was nowhere to go—

Lockdown struck him hard across the faceplate. "Stop sniveling."

"Get off me!"

"You're not in a place to be giving orders, sweetspark," said Lockdown. The hook bit in cruelly under Optimus's chin.

"But I am," said a voice from the doorway. Optimus couldn't see him, but the voice was definitely Megatron, and from the way Lockdown tensed up, he'd probably just come in with a charged fusion cannon. "Step away from the slab."

Lockdown did, raising his servos. "Intruder defense systems—" he started, and Megatron laughed.

"You don't think I was stupid enough to come alone, do you?" he said. "We've gutted your ship; did you know that a lot of its modifications are compatible with *Polychrest's*? Put those stasis cuffs on. Now." Lockdown hesitated. Megatron's cannon's whine surged up into the audible. "Now."

Lockdown snarled and moved. The lights went down. Optimus fought the stasis cuffs, tried to gasp a warning. Metal clashed, and then Megatron laughed. Lockdown cursed, something went *whumph-zap* and the lights came back on.

Megatron dropped Lockdown carelessly on one of the shelves, securely stasis cuffed, and drew a sword. "Hold still."

Optimus did, optics wide. There was being dramatic, but this was taking it too far! He fought not to flinch as the sword came down, felt a whisper of air and metal against his frame as it severed the restraints.

Megatron offered him a hand up, said, “Smokescreen, report.”

Smokescreen’s voice crackled back through his comms; he must have put them on externally audible channels, though Optimus couldn’t see *why*. “*We’ve completed the operation, Lord Megatron. Polychrest reports ready for departure.*”

“Good,” said Megatron, and turned and fired on the cabinets and shelving. Lockdown yelled protest; Megatron ignored him until the contents of every shelf were reduced to smoking rubble. He picked up Lockdown and slammed him onto the slab, reactivating the restraints as he did. He destroyed the shelf Lockdown had been on as well, then stood back and looked down at Lockdown.

“Next time,” he said, “I won’t bother coming myself. I’ll send the Justice Division after you.”

Lockdown’s optics widened, flicked to Optimus.

“Optimus is under my protection,” said Megatron, leaning forward. “When you accepted this commission, you must have known that. You were stupid enough to take it anyway. I will choose to believe it was stupidity, rather than the belief you could best me, which is why you’re still online. Am I clear?”

Lockdown’s optics narrowed again. “It’s business. Nothin’ personal about it.”

Megatron smiled. “Then consider this me making it personal,” he said. “You will not touch any Decepticon under my command, nor any Autobot under Optimus’s. Try it again, and I’ll do considerably more than destroy everything you care about. My Decepticons have stripped this ship of every valuable mod. I have destroyed your collection. I would pull the remaining modifications out of your frame myself, but with an Autobot squadron coming in as we speak, I don’t have the interest or the time. But try anything—anything at all save fleeing once you inevitably free yourself—and so help me Unicron, I shall turn the entire fleet on you.”

Lockdown tried to puff himself up. “If I’d known you wanted the little Autobot on your spike that badly—”

Megatron’s fusion cannon made an entirely inappropriate *tink* noise as it came to rest against Lockdown’s chest plating. “You’re missing the point,” he said. “You defied my protection, and my authority. You recall what I did to Dirge.”

Was that a flicker of fear that crossed Lockdown’s faceplate?

“Good,” said Megatron. “You have proven useful in the past, Lockdown. You have that to thank for your continued function. Come, Optimus. We have a battle to fight.”

The moment they were out of the room, he turned back around, going down on one knee to better examine Optimus. “You are unharmed? If he injured you, I will go back in and offline him this moment.”

“I’m fine,” said Optimus, as the reaction hit. He tried not to tremble, but his frame had its own ideas, the hazy memories of the last time he’d spent in Lockdown’s servos flooding back. He reached for his grapples to make sure they were still there.

Megatron half extended one servo, hesitated, then gently laid it on Optimus’s forearm. “If you wish

it, I can still offline him.”

Optimus shook his helm. “I’m fine now. Really.”

“As you wish,” said Megatron. “Do you require assistance?”

“No, no, no assistance.” The prospect of Megatron carrying him through the halls again was just embarrassing.

“Are you sure about the offlining?”

“Yes, I’m sure,” snapped Optimus. “Absolutely, positively sure. Don’t we have a battle?”

“A small one,” said Megatron, regretful. “Mostly in the air, by the looks of it. They sent hardly *anyone*.”

“What about the humans?”

“Ratchet is a remarkable diplomat when the situation so demands.”

“I need more specifics than that.”

“The humans were remarkably cooperative, though the one named Fanzone did take the time to make a generally derogatory remark about machines.”

“Oh no,” said Optimus. “If this goes truly badly, remind me to have a box of chocolate and some flowers sent to his wife.” At Megatron’s startled expression, he added, “How do you think we managed so long without being arrested as dangers to the peace?”

“I wasn’t aware that you were bribing the organics.”

“It was a polite gesture, not a bribe,” said Optimus. “And polite gestures count for a lot more when they don’t try and turn around and kill people.”

“The Dinobots and Soundwave weren’t necessarily designed to *kill* people. I simply pointed out the desirability of liberty.”

“Shuttlescrap.” They came around a corner to find Smokescreen and a group of Decepticons pushing anti-grav trolleys into the boarding tackle.

“Lord Megatron,” said Smokescreen. “With all respect, Commander Slipstream requests we hurry. The Autobots will break atmosphere within the hour.”

“Have we all the modifications?”

“Yes, my lord. These are the last of them.”

“Good,” said Megatron. “Let’s go make the Autobot fools sorry they ever laid optics on this planet.”

Smokescreen grinned. “With pleasure, my lord.” She turned back to her command. “You heard Lord Megatron. Move your afts! There’s tailpipe to kick!”

Optimus, watching her, wondered if he would ever get as good at commanding Decepticons as that. He hoped so.

---



Ratchet reported back to his post in *Victory's* medbay, and he and his staff clustered around the monitor, watching the Autobots come in. They'd managed to move the confrontation out over some kind of cultivated land—the vibrations from *Victory's* engines alone were enough to shatter every window in downtown Detroit—but it still wasn't ideal. The squadron had set up a defensive perimeter around the city the moment it became clear the Autobots intended to force a confrontation on Earth itself, rather than on the Moon, which would have been the ideal terrain. No one would have to worry about squashed humans there.

Of course, it was in the Autobots' best interest that their opponents be distracted by squashed humans. Hence the perimeter. Ratchet was rather startled that Megatron had thought of that, much less given the orders, but Megatron seemed to be in a mood to shatter expectations today. Given the results, Ratchet wasn't going to complain.

He'd had to watch Lockdown drag Optimus away, and then the human police had come to investigate the commotion. The deputy called Fanzone, who muttered about machines, and told Professor Sumdac, who had the *Victory's* hailing frequency. Ratchet, audials turned up to full sensitivity, eavesdropping on the conversation over the deputy's communication device, would have winced at the sudden pregnant silence when Megatron answered. Then Professor Sumdac said, in a tone that made Ratchet *wonder* how Sari got away with so much slag, "I see that Optimus was indeed correct when he said he had a lot to explain."

"Yes, he does," said Megatron, in his most pleased, condescending tone. Ratchet, beginning to get some control over his motor functions again, groaned. "Now what is the reason for this call?"

"Lockdown's got Optimus," said Ratchet. There was a pause. Megatron said, "What was that?"

"We found Ratchet in partial stasis and Optimus gone," said Professor Sumdac. "What was that, Captain? Oh. Ratchet believes Lockdown to be responsible."

"Of course," said Megatron. "I will deal with it. What is Ratchet's condition?"

"I'm *fine*," snapped Ratchet. "Just waiting for it to wear off. Tell him I'll come meet with you in Optimus's place."

"He says he's fine."

"Glad to hear it. A pleasure as always, Professor Sumdac."

A pause, probably as Professor Sumdac made absolutely sure the communication channel was off, and then, "What was Optimus thinking?"

"Get me up there and I can explain," said Ratchet.

"I hope you can," said Professor Sumdac.

Sumdac's reaction when it was explained was better than Ratchet had expected, but deeply concerning all the same. He'd looked up at Ratchet, both startled and angry, and in the few seconds before Fanzone exploded into profanity, said, "Oh no, and my prototypes aren't even ready for testing! I'll get right to work!"

"This is why I *hate* machines!" started Fanzone, but Professor Sumdac was already gone. Ratchet looked down at the other humans and let out the most sparkfelt sigh he'd voiced in ages. He waited for Fanzone to stop yelling, and then said, "Don't worry, we'll take care of it. Should I tell Professor Sumdac?"

“I’ll tell him,” said Fanzone. “You lot focus on dealing with the mess.” The look Fanzone’d given Ratchet didn’t sit well at all with him, but there were bigger organic swimming things to heat. Namely the Autobot squadron that had just bridged in over the atmosphere, and the comm from Megatron saying Optimus was online and well—or as well as anyone who’d just been fished out of Lockdown’s filthy clutches could be.

And now they waited. The Autobots were visible without magnification now.

The comms crackled on, Optimus’s voice. *“Hold the line,”* he said. *“There are 1.2 million sentient beings in that city. We cannot allow them to be harmed.”* He paused. *“The Elite Guard thinks they can take whatever they want, no matter the cost. Today, we prove them wrong.”*

## Chapter 38

Optimus looked up at the ranks of Autobot shuttles coming in for landing, at the command ship above them, and reset his vocalizer out of sheer nervousness. They had to do this—but the odds weren't good at all.

He glanced sidelong at Megatron, who also stared up, grinning. "Autobot aggressors," he said. His voice doubled oddly in Optimus's audials; he was transmitting his words to all comm frequencies. "I am Megatron. This planet is under my protection, the protection of the Decepticon Empire. Attempt similar oppression on it as you have inflicted on Cybertron, and you will be destroyed."

Optimus hastily reset his comms to broadcast as well. "There's still a chance to resolve this without lost lives. Turn around. Leave Earth in peace. We don't have to do this!"

Megatron made a face worthy of Sari at that.

Optimus's answer came in the shape of a blaster bolt from the nearest shuttle. He dodged, brought out his battlemask, and raised his axe. "That's what I thought," he muttered. Next to him, Megatron snorted.

Fighting was easier this time. He was defending Earth, not trying to conquer an Autobot colony. These bots—he could hardly bear to think of them as Autobots—were trying to destroy humanity. He'd stood against Megatron with nothing but a batch of repair bots to save this planet; he wasn't about to let the Elite Guard do whatever they wanted.

He slapped a bot aside with the flat of his axe, a grounder with a jetpack similar to his. The Elite Guard had had enough time to replicate it, evidently. Most of the rest of the fighting was on the ground, and the Decepticon and AFF forces down there seemed to be holding their own pretty well. He and Megatron and a few of the other flyers were trying to keep the handful of Autobot flyers—and the shuttles—from picking off the ground forces. Very few of these bots seemed to know what they were doing in the air, and Optimus wondered if their jetpacks were as new to them as his had been during the battle over Detroit.

A blow with the axe took out one stabilizing wing on an attacker. The Autobot yelled as she lost control and spiraled to the ground, but she'd live. Optimus was already looking around for the next threat.

And an instant too late, saw one of the shuttles fire at Megatron. Optimus screamed a warning, threw himself at Megatron to knock him out of the way.

Something struck him, slammed him hard against Megatron's plating and *wrenched*, and then there was pain, nothing put the pain, and cold deep within his chassis, where no cold should be.

---

The little Autobot was a pleasure to fight alongside. Megatron remembered doing so on Earth, the sheer satisfaction of having an efficient fighter at his back, and a quickly-ignored, very small part of him felt somewhat badly for using him as a shield back then. It had been a waste of an effective warrior. Optimus moved fast, elegantly, and though that stupid 'jetpack' of his would never rival the wings of a real flyer, he handled it well.

That and his political acuity and intelligence made him very attractive indeed.

Megatron batted away a blaster shot with one of his swords and lunged forward to skewer the

Autobot responsible. He blasted a shuttle out of the way and saw a flash of red and blue out of the corner of his optic as Optimus dealt with an opponent on their flank. He grinned.

And then Optimus's weight slammed sideways into him, the little Autobot yelling a warning into his audial, words that scaled up into a binary scream of pain, and the press of Optimus's frame against him went limp. Megatron caught him before he fell, and his servos found wet energon and the slick ugly surface of thick cables, the jagged edges of plating. He looked down, at the mess he'd put his servo into, Optimus's internals bared and ruined.

The Autobot was like a human child's doll in his servos, small and fragile. Disconnected cables and lines snaked out of his chassis down Megatron's arms, hot and slimy, gushing energon. Somewhere deep in the hole that had been a perfectly functional frame a few clicks ago, the rounded edge of his tank glistened, streaked pink and black with energon and oil.

"Hold the line!" Megatron roared over comms at the rest of them. "I will return!"

He gathered Optimus into his arms, hardening his spark to the gasping reedy shriek this produced, and flew back to the *Victory*, fast enough that warnings of overstressed thrusters popped up in his HUD. He could feel Optimus's fluids dripping down his arms, still hot and fresh; he was still leaking like a punctured oil drum.

He tried not to think about the hot urgency that wrapped his lines, the way his intake closed, the way his traitorous servos wanted to shake. He was not afraid. The wounding of one Autobot ally, no matter how important, was not the reason for the horror and denial, the way everything sharpened down to the trembling weight in his arms, why even over the wind he could hear the stifled whimpers of his burden. He'd seen Decepticons twice Optimus's mass take a wound like this and go down shrieking; the little Autobot's pride had to be enormous to overcome the agony.

"If you offline I will resurrect you myself, you little fool." He realized he'd said it aloud, but Optimus likely hadn't heard him.

He landed, less gracefully than could be wished, shoved past the alarmed mecha in the shuttlebay and ran, *ran* to medical, holding Optimus close, hoping the movement wouldn't damage him further.

"I need a medic!" He heard the desperation in his voice, wanted to be angry at it, but couldn't care.

Someone said something, a gurney appeared by his elbow. "My lord," said one of the medics, and Megatron stared down at him, uncomprehending, until the mech gestured and he realized the gurney was for Optimus. He set the little mech down as gently as he could, and something in the terrified optics wrenched his spark. A little blue servo groped weakly for his—and then the medic shouted something at his fellows and Optimus was whisked away into the surgery, leaving Megatron with one servo outstretched, looking after him.

He couldn't remain here one moment longer. Megatron snarled, whether at himself or the medics, he wasn't sure, turned on his heel and fled back into the battle.

Battle, he could manage.

---

Commotion outside of the operating room, and the orderly slid a mech with red and blue plating onto the slab in front of him. Ratchet had already clamped three of the spurting energon lines before he realized his patient was still online and making little terrified pained bleats; not that he could risk full stasis before the mech's energon pressure had been restored to something useful and his spark could be stabilized. One of his nurses patted at the mech's undamaged plating, murmured reassurances.

Ratchet reached for the next clamp, swore at the mech handing it to him viciously as the useless fragger fumbled it, and applied it anyway. “Energon, groundframe, seven liters.”

First Aid reached past him and got the line in.

“Spark levels,” said Ratchet.

“Steadying,” said First Aid.

Ratchet touched the undamaged servo. “You’ll be fine, kid,” he said, and looking up saw that it was Optimus.

His tank twisted into a hard knot. “You’ll be fine,” he repeated. “Aid, get him into stasis. He’s stable for now. Next!”

## Chapter 39

Sentinel Magnus watched the footage of the battle and seethed.

It did his spark good to see Optimus fall, it really did. Served the glitch right, having his own idiocy be responsible for his offlining—but then Megatron elbowed his way in, his greasy servos all over Optimus's frame. He was right, they really were fragging after all. As disgusting as it was to contemplate, at least his propaganda was *accurate*.

But the bit that really wrenched his crankshaft came later, when Megatron rejoined the battle, covered in energon and oil—Optimus's energon and oil, frag him!—and won it.

All by his fragging, filthy, glitchridden, *Decepticon* self.

It was terrifying.

This was the seventh time he'd watched it, the whole thing, and it was *still* terrifying. Megatron plowed into the line, charged shuttles, shredded both line and shuttles with what seemed like nothing more than a pair of swords and sheer rage. The shuttles fell back—at least, the *surviving* shuttles fell back—and with them aboard, the fragging command ship saw Megatron coming at it and *fled*.

He was going to nail the commander responsible for this debacle to the fragging *wall*. Sentinel slammed a fist down on the table and raked his free servo over his helm. Megatron. On his own. Had shredded a full line of battle.

Covered in Optimus's energon and oil. That last part torqued him off most. Filthy little cheat. Optimus fragging Megatron. Megatron putting up with the little glitch *leaking* all over him. Who in their right mind would do that? It wasn't to be tolerated.

They were going to *pay*—

On the comm screen, Lockdown reset his vocalizer noisily. "Are you done stewing?" he asked. "Because I have something else you'll want to hear."

"And why would I want to hear anything from you?" snapped Sentinel. "You *failed*."

"Yeah. It's *why* I failed that you want to hear." Lockdown brought his hook into the visual feed and pretended to examine it. "It'll cost you."

"Why would I care?"

"It's about Megatron," said Lockdown. "A weakness."

"Fine. You have my attention."

"Payment first."

"*Fine*," snapped Sentinel, and typed in the code. "There. You have it."

"Pleasure doing business with you as always, Magnus sir," said Lockdown. "When Megatron finished his little heroic rescue, he couldn't resist threatening me one last time before leaving. He told me to remember Dirge." At Sentinel's expression of irritation, he grinned further. Frag him. "Ah. You don't know about Dirge."

“I don’t make it a habit to learn about Decepticon squabbles,” said Sentinel.

“This one, you should have,” said Lockdown. He looked too satisfied for Sentinel’s peace of processor. “So, just before the end of the last war...”

---

Stable didn’t mean out of Primus’s grabby little servos, not by a long shot. Ratchet’s patch job on Optimus hadn’t saved Optimus; it had staved off deactivation long enough to allow him to repair the other critical cases. As soon as no one was in immediate danger of dying, Ratchet started in on the major surgeries Optimus needed to survive. Replacement lines, lots of them. Prying out the components that had fused with the heat of the blaster bolt, replacing those, too. Removing the slag melted to the sides of his tank and sparkchamber—slag that had once been bits of his plating and his internals. Cutting away the plating too heat-warped to salvage and welding in new metal.

At the end of it all, Optimus would live. He’d even be restored to full function, something Ratchet was enormously proud of. When you’d spent three megacycles peeling at someone’s sparkchamber, you took what you could get. Right now, Optimus had a big ugly patch of gray metal on one side, but getting it nicely painted could wait. He was online, and he was going to *stay* online, and that was what mattered.

The humans complicated everything. Humans wanted to *know* everything. No sooner had Ratchet finished reattaching the last of Optimus’s external plating, a horrible job at best, but better than rearranging his internals, than Sari and Professor Sumdac turned up, demanding to see him.

They already knew what happened, they said. They wanted to see Optimus *anyway*. So Ratchet obliged.

“He’s going to be under for the next few days,” he said, stepping carefully through the infirmary doors. “That shot came within inches of offlining him, and still damaged some pretty critical components. He’ll pull through just fine, though. Kid’s tough—slag.” He paused in the doorway, looking at the berth, or rather what was in the chair next to the berth. “I told that crankcase to go get some recharge in his *own berth*, frag him.”

Megatron slumped back in the chair, one elbow propped on the berth, helm leaned against his servo, optics offline and systems humming irregularly in recharge. A datapad, still active, had fallen from his other servo to the floor.

“Why’s Megatron here?” hissed Sari.

“He is the leader of the Decepticons, if you haven’t noticed,” said Ratchet.

“No, I mean, why’s he—”

“Ratchet,” said Professor Sumdac, with an expression that even Ratchet could tell indicated he had worked out the real reason that Megatron was there, “I would like to have a word with you and Sari. Outside, please, so that we do not wake anyone up.” This last was accompanied by a pointed look in Megatron’s direction.

Ratchet muttered a curse under his breath, and followed. “Professor Sumdac—”

Professor Sumdac looked up at him and folded his arms. “I do not know how to put this delicately, Ratchet,” he said. “Megatron is extremely manipulative, and it is irresponsible on your part to encourage—”

“I’m not encouraging anything!” said Ratchet, raising his servos defensively. “It’s Optimus’s choice,

not mine—but you can bet that I’ve been keeping a close optic on Megatron, and as far as I can tell, he’s been pretty well behaved.”

“Yes, he was ‘pretty well behaved’ when assisting me, too,” said Professor Sumdac. “That did not stop him from using me to his own purposes.”

“Believe me, I think his own purposes in this case align with Optimus’s best interests,” said Ratchet.

Sari folded her arms, too. “Uh, hello, this is Optimus we’re talking about here? He’s not just a doormat, he’s a doormat that moves so he can get stepped on again! And you’re trusting *Megatron* around him?”

Ratchet pinched his nasal ridge, let out a long ventilation, and counted back from ten. “Megatron’s got standards,” he said after a time. “He’s not about to hurt Optimus, *trust* me on this.”

The glares intensified.

“It’s their business,” said Ratchet. “And how the frag did you miss that footage of the battle?”

Sari and her father looked at each other. “I didn’t find it particularly reassuring,” said Professor Sumdac, carefully. “Certainly, I suppose certain parties would be happy to have it interpreted as Megatron getting revenge for Optimus’s injury. But that is not a safe assumption, not with Megatron. He is very persuasive. When he is manipulating you, you do not feel that he is asking anything of you at all, but that it is all your idea. Believe me. I know.”

“We are not having this discussion here,” said Ratchet. “Conference room. Now. I need to show you something—particularly what exactly happened on Cybertron that made Optimus defect.” He was already sending the request to Slipstream for the video of that one protest, for the security recordings of the shuttle explosion, and he ducked back into the medbay to pick up the datapad with a copy of Pharma’s little project on it. “This isn’t about Megatron manipulating anyone,” he said. “Sentinel and the Autobots didn’t leave us with much of a choice. Come on.”

---

Megatron woke in the medbay, spinal strut roaring protest. He grumbled at it, looked down at the little Autobot next to him.

His spark dropped. He bared his dentae in a snarl, rose all in one motion and left, the distress too great to allow anything else.

How dare she? How fragging *dare* she? The image of that hideous damage seemed printed on the insides of his optics, overlaying another image, an old one.

Strika was a fool, and he was weak in his dotage, weak and sentimental. The Decepticons could not afford for him to make this mistake twice, and he so nearly had! The way his tank clenched when he thought of that little trembling weight in his servos was proof enough. He was a fool for this, and Strika doubly so!

The Lord of the Decepticons had not the luxury of grief. He had lost a war to it, once. Now, he’d almost made the same mistake.

The little Autobot was lovely indeed, intelligent, a brilliant warrior, but no, it was folly to take this regard further. It endangered the Autobot as much as it did him.

A small part of his spark hurt at this. Was a private affair so much to ask? it wondered. He’d already given up so much for the Cause, was he to surrender this small solace as well?



But Megatron had not risen so far, had not won battles by listening to that part of his spark. He shoved it aside, and stormed to the bridge.

Or tried to. There were humans in the way, the hateful Sumdac and his offspring, and Ratchet. Megatron stopped where he was and glared down at all three of them.

“Stop that,” said Ratchet. Megatron bared his dentae. “Professor Sumdac may have just found a way to cure Skywarp and the others.”

“How wonderful,” he said, barely suppressing the urge to say, *With something else he looted from my frame?*

“Hopefully,” said Sumdac, glaring back at him. Oh dear, did the memory of his captivity rankle? How very unpleasant, to be imprisoned and used to further an alien interest, for a handful of orns. How very unpleasant indeed. Was having one’s body fully functional and inviolate a burden rather than boon under such circumstances? Perhaps an apology was in order.

“There is a matter I want to bring up now that you are awake,” said Sumdac. He stepped back so he could see both of them, and frowned. “You need to leave Earth. *All* of you. I am not having a war fought here.”

“Nothing would make me happier,” said Megatron. “Unfortunately, that’s not up to me, now is it?” He frowned at Ratchet. “I dare say your kind little leader would protest most volubly at the idea of leaving Earth to fend for itself against an Autobot invasion.”

“We are capable of dealing with the Autobots,” said Sumdac.

“And here I thought that Sumdac Systems didn’t make weapons. Has time so corrupted your morality, Professor?”

“Hey!” Sari stepped forward, tiny fists balled. “Don’t you dare talk to my dad like that!”

“It’s not a weapon,” said Sumdac. “It’s a forcefield.”

“You’re going to surround the planet with a forcefield,” said Megatron, flatly. He’d heard worse plans. Mostly from Blitzwing. *Overcharged* Blitzwing.

“No, only attackers, a long-term forcefield surrounding the planet would make no sense, energetically speaking,” said Sumdac. “We also may be able to create something that broadcasts the effect of stasis cuffs. But none of this will damage the target. We want the Autobots gone, not destroyed.”

Megatron snorted. “So be it. We have bigger problems than babysitting *you*.”

It was several megacycles later, when they’d finished their preparations to take off, that the message arrived on his private comms. He hadn’t even known that Sumdac *had* those codes, and the reminder of that violation made him snarl to himself, drive a fist into the wall.

*Optimus has friends*, the message said. *Don’t even think about using him. You may have fooled Ratchet, but not me.*

How very unlike Sumdac. How *cute*, that he was acting as if Optimus was one of his offspring, a helpless one at that. Perhaps the human had learned, though he was deluded if he believed Megatron meant to be that foolish.

He tried to think of a suitably scathing retort, but stony silence seemed to be best.

## Chapter 40

“Strika,” said Megatron, a low growl, “We need to talk.”

Strika stepped forward to let the door slide shut behind her. She’d already seen the reports from the battle on Earth. Successful, but Optimus’s wounding was both horrifying and sobering. The alliance was tenuous enough; had that shot been even a digitwidth higher, the alliance would have died as the bolt ripped the Autobot’s spark into oblivion.

Ratchet was a wreck. He was trying to hide it, but Strika could tell. The exhaustion showed, the unwillingness to leave Optimus’s berthside even in the hands of a competent assistant. He probably blamed himself. Medics always did. But Optimus would live, and that was enough of a victory for the day.

And now, looking at Megatron, Strika had a strong suspicion that the blaster bolt hadn’t just damaged Optimus. Her leader was sitting very still and rigid, and looking at her with narrowed optics. She could all but smell the rage wafting off him.

“Indeed, my lord,” she said. “Your attack on the Autobot line of battle, while effective, was incredibly risky. Losing both you and Optimus in one battle would be unacceptable.”

“Indeed it would,” he said, still cold. Strika paused in the doorway and narrowed her optics back at him in a frown. Was he angry at *her*? That was the most juvenile thing he possibly could manage. “Optimus almost deactivated.”

“But he didn’t,” said Strika. “Thanks to you, and to Ratchet.”

He surged upright. “Are you a fool, General? Are you a complete and utter fool?”

“Not the last time I checked, my lord,” said Strika, and folded her arms. “Neither am I Starscream.”

“You encouraged me. You encouraged me knowing full well what happened—”

“With Terminus,” stated Strika. Scraplet fragging Primus, he really was this juvenile. Anger gathered tight under her spark. She squared her shoulders and looked at him, half hoping he wouldn’t pick up on her rage. If he didn’t, he wouldn’t back off, and she’d have an excuse to fight him.

“It lost us the *war*,” snarled Megatron. “Have you not learned from experience? You want me to form a bond with a fragile little Autobot who is so easily offlined? Who is so much a helpless little fool? You *idiot*, Strika!”

“Let me be sure I understand you correctly,” said Strika, letting each word fall deliberately. “You believe that I am a fool for merely encouraging your interest in Optimus, because you believe that your reaction to Terminus’s death lost us the last war.” She was pleased; not a hint of derision, not a hint of the vicious rage that rose in her. If he wanted to play himself as too tragically bereaved to think sensibly because of a dead bondmate, he’d chosen the wrong audience.

He just looked at her.

“Fragging Unicron in the *Pit*, Megatron!” Strika roared. “You’re not that fragging *important*!”

She’d startled him, startled and angered. She stepped forward, still yelling, pressing her advantage while he was still too surprised to yell back. “He was more than your fragging mate! We lost our

*chief strategist*. Compared to the rest of the turmoil his deactivation caused, your misery hardly signified! You want to blame yourself for our loss? Try this instead; it was *my* fault. He died, and all his duties fell into my lap and I had no clue how to deal with them! I had no clue what to do, frag you, because I was a warrior and cared about nothing more than the next objective! *That's* concrete! *That* makes a lot more sense than 'we lost because our poor leader had his spark broken'!"

"That is *enough*!"

"No, it is not!" They were practically chestplates to chestplates, him glaring up into her face, and Strika saw the dangerous light in his optics and did not care. "You think you lost us the war single-served? Never mind the Allspark, never mind the spacebridges, never mind fragging Ultra and his fragging hammer, Lord Megatron is capable of losing wars all by himself out of sheer perversity? You pompous preening *spike casing*!"

"You think this excuses—"

"Do you think you're special because your mate died, you fragger?" Strika's voice rose to a pitch she seldom allowed off the battlefield. "We've all lost people. *All* of us. So stop being such a fragging *coward* about it!"

The blow to her midsection sent her staggering back. The second all but knocked her off her stabilizers. Megatron charged, yelling in incoherent rage. Strika set herself and met him halfway, slammed him onto the ground. He slashed her across the stabilizer with his claws, seized her arm and pulled her down into a hard knee to the faceplate, clubbed her two-handed across the back as he came up.

His cannon whined to life. So he was serious. Strika laughed into his faceplate and surged forward, uncaring of the dents he left, the hot scorch of his cannon across her side. She slammed her into the wall. He kned her in the interface array, dug claws under a plate and wrenched. Strika roared with the pain, helmbuted him in the nasal guard. Bashed him into the wall again.

"I don't care if you don't want to hear it," she said, bashed him again. He brought a stabilizer up and kicked her away. The second cannonblast didn't go as wide, and Strika grunted as the ablative armor over her arm took the blow. It hurt like Pit, would have killed someone Slipstream's size, but it was far from enough to discourage her. "Because that's why I'm here." She dodged another blow, grabbed his arm, fingers denting the metal, used his momentum to yank him helm first into the conference table. "I tell you what you don't want to hear, my lord, and I'm not about to back down because you'd like someone else to blame for—whatever the *frag* this is. You're upset over the little Autobot's health? Not my fault!"

She grunted as the next kick landed. If she was in a charitable mood, she might allow him to win this fight easily. She wasn't. "You can't deal with the emotional conflicts related to the little Autobot? Not my fault! That's on you, my lord, you alone! You want something to blame yourself for, try that instead of this idiotic self-aggrandizing 'I lost us the war' slag!"

He stepped back, venting hard. He'd definitely come off better than her, but not by that much.

"If you find your decision-making is impaired by your feelings for him, then that's your fragging problem. Not admitting your feelings—or not pursuing them—isn't going to make a jot of difference." Strika paused to vent hard. Whatever she pretended for the young cons, she wasn't as young as she used to be. "You'll have to deal with them one way or another. And I won't always be here to talk you out of these fits."

He looked at her a long time.

“You overstepped.”

“Sit on a missile and rotate.”

He looked startled.

“I’m not Starscream,” said Strika. “I’m not about to play the toady because we had a fight.” She probed at a dent, hissed with discomfort. “And don’t use your fragging cannon inside the ship, it’s Pit to repair.” She looked up at him. “And go to Ambulon, not Ratchet, to get those dealt with. Ratchet’s going to singe our tailpipes enough for this as it is. Ambulon understands.”

Megatron paused. “I suppose,” he said after a time, “that you are correct.”

Strika wasn’t sure if he meant about Optimus or Ambulon, but she’d take what she could get.

---

Ambulon had gotten to the welds first, but when Strika showed up in his office that nightcycle, Ratchet could *tell* she’d been in a fight. And since there hadn’t been a battle recently...

“Did Megatron do this?”

“Yes,” said Strika, obviously pleased with herself. “And you should just see him. Serves him right for cheating in our practice matches. Philosophical debate.”

“Pit of a debate,” he said, and followed her out. “What did you tweak his thrusters about?”

“Not here,” said Strika.

She remained silent until they reached Ratchet’s quarters, then waited for the door to close. “About Optimus. He was concerned about earlier events.”

Ratchet glanced sidelong up at her. “Would this have anything to do with Terminus?”

She stiffened, standing in the doorway. He sat on the edge of the berth, deliberately nonthreatening.

“How do you know that name?” she asked. After a moment she moved forward to sit with him.

“I’m an observant mech,” said Ratchet. “I saw his name on Megatron’s medical files—it’s very unusual for bonded mecha to survive the death of half of the bond, and I was making a study of survivors. And I’ve heard the name bandied about a lot recently. Usually accompanied by significant looks.”

Strika was quiet a moment. A huge servo gently touched his back. He leaned into the touch, and she began stroking his dorsal plating, her optics dim slits.

“And because of Optimus,” she said at last.

“Yes,” said Ratchet. “I know about Starscream, which led me to believe that Megatron had terrible taste in mecha, but I know nothing about Terminus. For Optimus’s sake...”

“Understood,” said Strika. She fell silent again, her servo still. Several long vents passed. “Perhaps it is Megatron’s story to tell, but I doubt he ever would, and if it would reassure you as to his intentions toward Optimus, it is worthwhile.” She pulled her servo back, as if embarrassed, folded them in her lap. Then, with a touch of humor, she added, “And it might save you from putting your stabilizer into

something nasty, later.

“There are bonded mecha, and then there are couples like Megatron and Terminus,” she said. “Or myself and Lugnut. The truly powerful bonds, the ones that baffle the medics, they’re very rare among warbuilds, and very common among civilian models. They’re not supposed to happen for us, but for Megatron and Terminus, one did. They were a wonder to watch on the field; they fought as one mech, one spark, and while they weren’t designed for heavy combat individually, together, they were as powerful as any frontliner you care to name. They joined the Decepticons together, when it was only a political movement under Megazarak.

“Megatron was already active, writing speeches and tracts and so on. His skills caught Megazarak’s attention, and he found himself swiftly promoted. He became the voice of the revolution; while Megazarak led, it was always Megatron’s movement, always his principles and philosophies truly behind it. Megazarak only wanted power, and didn’t care—at that point.

“He did send Megatron to speak before the Council. You know what happened next—the Prime at the time...”

“Pacificus,” said Ratchet, remembering the long-ago newscast, the smoldering broken frame, blue and red, and the wreckage of the Council around him.

“Yes. Betrayed Megatron into the hands of the then Primal Vanguard on the floor of the Council. Megatron, Starscream with him, fought his way free—Terminus and I found them soon after and we fled back to Kaon as the War began.

“They were inseparable, the two of them. I cannot say this enough, Ratchet. Megatron has never done anything half-sparked, and this was no exception. He adored Terminus. Terminus was as much a part of him as a limb; he was as much to Terminus. Their worlds may have centered on the Cause, but their anchors were one another.

“Megazarak promoted Megatron to his second-in-command, a position no one had occupied long, and, as he had with Megatron’s predecessors, became suspicious that Megatron planned to overthrow him. Only, with Megatron, he was right. None of us, not me, not Lugnut, not Terminus, not Starscream, could see the Decepticons surviving with that fool in command. But Megatron watched himself, held his glossa, a long, long time, and we dared think he’d dodged Megazarak’s suspicions.

“Until he criticized a personnel choice. A minor thing, and he was mild; most wouldn’t have taken it as criticism. Megazarak said nothing at the time, but when Megatron returned to his quarters that night, he found Megazarak’s thugs waiting for them. They tortured Terminus, spark and frame, to make Megatron beg Megazarak for mercy.”

Ratchet snorted, grim. “A lot of good that likely did them.”

“It worked,” said Strika, equally grim. “That should tell you all you need to know about what they did to Terminus. I knew nothing of this until I got the comm from Megatron, after Megazarak had left them.

“I found him cradling Terminus. Terminus was still online, but there was so little left of him—what was expected of someone so injured was suicide. There was no chance of recovery, not with the medics ordered not to give assistance. But Terminus refused to die with Megazarak still online, enraged he’d been used as a weapon against his bonded, and Megatron refused to lose his mate to such an attack, and refused to allow such a cowardly method to kill him, as well.

“We faked Terminus’s deactivation. We hid him, nursed him as best we could, and Megatron returned to his duties. Megazarak remarked on his survival, then dismissed it, likely proud to have so broken his lieutenant, broken past redemption. We waited. It was solar cycles before Megazarak made a great enough error to allow Megatron to challenge him formally. Megatron won; Megazarak had grown even more arrogant and foolish with time. Terminus insisted on seeing it; I think it was his appearance that made Megazarak truly yield. On his urging, Megatron spared Megazarak and sent him into exile, no longer a person, not even worth killing.

“They began the business of running the war themselves, and with Terminus’s strategic genius behind Megatron’s leadership, we started winning. Even without the Allspark, even without spacebridges, we thought we could win.”

“You certainly came very close to it,” said Ratchet. That was an ugly memory, Praxus. New horrors every megacycle, and the constant knowledge that they were losing, the constant dread of the future.

“We did. And then Terminus was assassinated.”

“That’s why you broke off the offensive in Praxus,” said Ratchet, with sudden acute understanding.

Strika nodded. “An ambitious fool attempted to kill Megatron through him. Megatron survived. Barely, for all that he tore the assassin limb from limb as his spark dropped into burnout. It was a close thing indeed, and the moment he rose from berth, he threw himself into the war with such vigor that he nearly starved himself into stasis lock in the first orn. I bullied him back into fueling, back into living, into caring, but I doubt he has ever fully recovered. It’s an old wound, one that he tries to pretend does not have a great hold on him, but it is still deeply painful. He still flinches from true intimacy; his relationship with Starscream was deliberate, choosing an impossible partner so he would not have to acknowledge how hurt he really was. Starscream knew it, knew most of his spark was still with a dead mech, and hated him for it.”

Her servos tightened. He reached to touch the back of one, and it turned over, clasped his gently, as if he were something immensely fragile. “Terminus’s deactivation crippled us, far more than I think any Autobot ever realized. A good thing, that. I have no doubt your Elite Guard would have killed him far earlier if they’d suspected.”

“We never knew he was bonded,” said Ratchet. “Not a hint. They discussed it, because of the scarring on his sparkchamber, but they attributed it to the Allspark.”

“The Allspark?”

“When he tried to combine it with his spark,” said Ratchet.

“Of course he did.” Strika sounded abruptly tired. “The sentimental fool. Turning the Allspark into a weapon, taking it into his own spark. Of course he did. Finally winning the war with something that included Terminus, however small a part he was in it—sentimental fool.”

“Why is he interested in Optimus?”

“Optimus reminds him of Terminus. Frag, the bot reminds *me* of Terminus sometimes, with the things he says and does. But he’s different enough. Optimus has a deep kindness Terminus never did, and I think Megatron needs that more than even he knows.”

“Yes,” said Ratchet. “He is kind.”

Strika nuzzled her helm against his, pulling him in against her. “As are you.”

Ratchet gasped a startled laugh and the tension broke and for some reason it was far funnier than it should have been. He laughed until his vents were wheezing with it.

Strika stroked his helm. "It's true," she said, stubbornly, and refused to say more.



## Chapter 41

He rebooted slowly, damage alerts flickering and fading away. Optimus onlined his optics and tried to sit up.

He glanced down at his midsection and gasped. An ugly weld ran across his abdomen, dead gray, as if an enormous something had simply taken a bite out of him.

The memory surfaced, and he shied away from it, from the very memory of that pain. The waking processor simply couldn't comprehend it, and even though he ached now, it was nothing compared to that agony.

He touched the new metal, surprised when he felt the pressure of his servo. It looked so completely alien—

“Get your filthy servos off that,” snapped Ratchet. Optimus's helm jerked up. “Do you know what sorts of things *live* on your servos? No, you don't. No, you don't want to.”

Optimus let out a ventilation of relief. It was the standard lecture. Everything had to be okay. “The battle—”

“We won,” said Ratchet. “Thanks to you.”

Optimus frowned. “All I remember is getting shot.”

“Megatron was very upset,” said Ratchet. “You should see the footage. He tore the Autobot line apart single-servoed.”

“What does that have to do with me?” Optimus shifted uneasily as Ratchet scanned him, glanced sideways at him.

“Isn't it obvious?” said Ratchet, with a smirk.

“No,” Optimus repressed his irritation. “No, it's really not.”

“He wanted revenge,” said Ratchet, and poked at the new metal. “Because of this.”

“I thought you said servos were filthy.” Optimus realized what he'd said and tensed, but Ratchet only snorted.

“I'm a medic. I *wash* mine.”

Optimus sat still while Ratchet finished checking him over. The thing with Megatron wanting revenge for his sake was patently absurd, of course, but Optimus alarmed himself it how much he *wanted* it to be true. The idea of Megatron esteeming him so highly was...nice.

He remembered Megatron's rage on Lockdown's ship and shivered.

“It's normal for the new metals to be sensitive,” said Ratchet, getting out the materials to restore his paint. “Your neural net's still calibrating for the new material.”

Optimus nodded, embarrassed that his thoughts had shown that much.

The only people who'd come looking for him—who'd ever *looked out* for him before—had been

this team, Ratchet and the others. That very fact had made them all but—well, the human term *family* fit well enough. The sheer strangeness of having people to rely on that much, even if Bumblebee could be a real crankcase sometimes, had made him wary at first, sure it was only because it was expedient. But they'd seen him at his worst, and didn't take any of the many opportunities to let him down that would have been absurdly easy to get away with. They'd faced Megatron with him.

He was still startled and wary every time he had further evidence of this. For that reason, Bumblebee and Bulkhead's failure to appear hurt more than it should have. He knew he ought to hope that they'd chosen to leave him, perhaps revolted at his treachery, because the alternative was that Sentinel had arrested them, and that was too horrible to contemplate. But the mere idea of them angry at him made his spark hurt. At least Ratchet was still here.

He looked at Ratchet, lecturing on about something or other as he worked, and ex-vented heavily. He'd probably scare Ratchet off if he mentioned any of this; the older mech wasn't fond of maudlin displays. Even if he was the reason Optimus was still online.

Before Earth, Sentinel and Elita had been all he'd needed as friends. And look where that had gotten him—both of them had learned who and what he truly was, and hated him. He couldn't say they didn't have good reason, especially Elita. Sentinel... Sentinel he couldn't think about. He was afraid that, if he did, he'd realize that Sentinel was somehow right, that he'd see himself the way Sentinel did and realize it was more accurate than the way he saw himself.

He had very few mecha he truly trusted, he realized. Prowl, certainly, once they'd come to understand each other. Ratchet was another. Bumblebee and Bulkhead, too. They'd all seen him as he truly was, and they all had been willing to stick their necks out for his sake, even when they didn't have to. Even when it would have been far more convenient not to.

He'd do the same for them and more. The sheer novelty of having it reciprocated was not something he was comfortable with. And the very idea that *Megatron* might think similarly of him...

It made him hopeful, and excited, and happy. He tried to push the thought away. He was presuming horribly, and the disappointment was more than he'd be able to bear if he was wrong.

Because he wanted it to be true. That was frightening in itself.

"Ratchet?" he said, and Ratchet paused in mid lecture and frowned at him, "Thank you."

"Here," said Ratchet, and plopped a datapad into his servos. "Instructions. I know you weren't listening. Also, a suggestion?"

"Yes?" said Optimus, looking up from the pad.

"Go find Megatron and let him know you're all right. It'll do him some good. He was worried."

Optimus stared at him.

"He fell asleep in the chair and everything," said Ratchet. "Go on. I'm sure there are all sorts of great leader-y things you need to do."

"Er," said Optimus, not sure how to respond to that.

"Go on, git," said Ratchet. Optimus wasn't sure what that meant, but the gesture that accompanied it was clear enough. He complied.

---

Strika didn't even look at him when he arrived on the bridge. She only said, "He's in the forward launch bay. You'll have some privacy there."

The absurd hope rose in him. He squashed it as best he could. *Don't be absurd*, he thought. *He likely had a good reason for everything he did. Megatron doesn't operate on sentiment alone!*

He got to the forward launch bay far sooner than he wanted to. Megatron stood among the shuttles and assorted repair kits, frowning through the forcefield as if the rocky planetoid in front of them had done him some serious wrong. Optimus reset his vocalizer.

Megatron turned, more abruptly than was his wont. "Optimus."

"You wanted to see me?"

Megatron's optics lingered on his newly painted abdomen. "I'm glad to see you functional, at least," he said. "If you had deactivated..."

Optimus looked down and shuffled his stabilizers. "You saved my life," he said.

"Ratchet saved your life. I merely delivered you," said Megatron. "I would have been..." he looked away, as if it were a painful admission, "upset, had you indeed deactivated. Our alliance would not have survived. And I would have been sorry to lose such a promising officer."

"There was Lockdown as well," said Optimus.

"Yes," said Megatron.

They looked at each other.

"I ah, heard that you were the reason the battle was won," said Optimus.

Megatron looked away. "I was concerned," he said.

That made no sense. "For what?"

"I believed you dead," said Megatron.

"Oh." He'd just as much as admitted it. Optimus's spark sped up. He stared up at Megatron. What the frag could you say to that?

Megatron moved forward, took his servo in his own, strangely gentle for all his size. Optimus stared up at him.

Megatron looked as if he were about to say something, then leaned further forward and almost touched the side of Optimus's helm, pulled his servo away quickly as if he hadn't quite meant to do it, as if he thought he might break Optimus with a touch. "Next time," he said, while Optimus gaped at him, realizing that was indeed a gesture of genuine affection, that he was *right*, "let me take the shot. My armor is better than yours and I never—" the servo tightened, then gentled immediately so as not to hurt him, "want to see you like that again. *Never.*"

Optimus, hugely daring, put his free servo on Megatron's, and froze, hoping he hadn't presumed too much. "I..."

"I called myself a thousand kinds of fool," said Megatron, "and Strika several thousand more. I have

grown to care for you perhaps more than I should, and seeing you so injured..." He looked away, obviously uncertain as to what he should say next.

"I wondered if I might be a fool to ask this," he said. "Or a fool to further pursue this, but I am sure I will be a fool in any case, no matter what I choose. Optimus, may I court you?"

There were no words for this. None at all. Optimus stared. He stammered something, stupid, no doubt. He reset his vocalizer—

—and the realization hit him like Meltdown's acid. Court. Megatron meant to court him, which meant that he wanted to propose a sparkbond, and he couldn't do that. Megatron thought he was still sealed.

He'd have to tell him.

His spark plummeted. He hadn't realized how much he'd hoped for this. He hadn't realized how much he wanted this, and now, *now*, to have it all yanked away... It was unfair, it was cruel. And there was nothing else he could do, nothing else that was right to do. He couldn't let Megatron begin courting him without knowing that he was already...

How was he to say this?

Optimus looked into Megatron's optics and could not speak. Shame rolled through him, hot and foul and he pulled his servos back out of the absurdly gentle huge ones that held them and stammered, "I can't."

Megatron looked puzzled. Concerned. Lowered his hand, reset his optics. Then nodded. "I understand," he said, very quietly indeed, and Optimus hoped he'd imagined strictly repressed hurt in that smooth voice.

He couldn't meet Megatron's optics anymore. It was wrong to simply leave at that. He wanted this, he didn't want Megatron to think that he found him frightening or repulsive or that he didn't trust him. "Wait," he said, and Megatron paused in the act of rising and bent that calm regard on him, made him feel small and foolish. He ducked his helm. "I'm unsuitable," he said, and shame rose hot in his intakes again. "I'm sorry."

"Your former function matters little to me," said Megatron, after a moment. "I would hope that you knew that. So what, exactly, renders you 'unsuitable' for such a match?"

Primus below, he was going to have to say it. He was going to have to say it out loud. He'd thought the inquiry, the public apology, had been bad. No, this was far, far worse. After all Megatron had done for him...

He took a deep ventilation, forced himself to look up, past Megatron's left shoulder if not exactly into his optics, straightened his frame into parade rest, and said, "I am not sealed."

After a moment, as Megatron said nothing, did not move, he dared look at his faceplate.

Utterly impassive. Impossible to tell if it hid disgust or anger.

"It was unlikely I was going to bond," he said after a moment, to fill that hideous silence.

At last Megatron spoke. "You mean to say that you are *not* inexperienced?"

Not trusting his vocalizer, Optimus nodded.

Megatron reset his optics a few times. Then something in that frame relaxed, and the corner of his mouth quirked ever-so-slightly up. “A relief,” he said.

Optimus’s utter shock must have been clearly visible, because he looked abruptly concerned again. “Was that what rendered you unsuitable?”

Optimus nodded again. He’d allowed himself a flare of hope, no more, because when Megatron found out who had taken his seal...

“It is of no issue *here*,” said Megatron.

“It was Sentinel,” said Optimus, before he lost his nerve entirely.

Again the shame and dread as Megatron reset his optics a few times.

“We all have our regrets,” said Megatron after a moment and Optimus wanted to flinch away from the implied judgement, looked down and clenched his servos.

And Megatron was kneeling in front of him again, servos on his shoulders. “Don’t take it to spark, Optimus. I don’t care about your previous interfacing habits, even if you had fragged all the Elite Guard and half the Senate into the bargain. If you want this, this we shall have—Sentinel be slagged.”

Optimus stared at him. “You don’t have to be bound by your previous offer,” he forced himself to say. “You didn’t know.”

“I don’t care,” said Megatron. “All I am concerned about is whether you want this.”

“I do,” said Optimus. “I do.” More than anything, in that moment, but he cut himself off before he could say it. “I only... I never thought...”

“I don’t care,” Megatron repeated. “I am no more sealed than you are. May I court you?”

“Yes,” said Optimus, spark beating fast. He half-wondered if this was a dream. He stepped into Megatron’s arms, leaned up and pressed his intake to Megatron’s.

Maybe it was hasty. Maybe it was a bad idea. But this once, Optimus managed to push those thoughts aside, let his world narrow down to the feeling of Megatron’s careful embrace, the plating under his hands, the hot press of Megatron’s intake, and his spark sang.

## Act IV

Before your eyes are wicked souls  
There's nowhere to run, face them straight on  
Someone tells me to erase my weakness or fear  
We reconstruct our minds  
Tightly hold onto that hand  
Believe in the bonds between each other  
And FIGHT!

--[TFA Japanese Opening](#)

*“Decepticon warship Conquest, this is Autobot shuttle Delta Echo Seven-Niner, requesting clearance to land.”*

“Autobot shuttle, this is *Conquest*. Please decelerate to seven thousand mechanometers and hold position. Verbally deactivate your self-destruct mechanisms.”

*“Acknowledged. Computer, override seven-six-one-thirteen. Authority...”*

Strika frowned at the viewscreen. That was an unusually large shuttle, the Elite Guard insignia still prominent on its bow. And the voice sounded familiar. “Smokescreen, instruct them to stand by to receive an inspection party.”

“Yes ma’am. Autobot shuttle, please stand by to receive an inspection party. Deactivate all weapons and unlock your starboard hatch.”

*“Acknowledged. Conquest, be advised we have a patient in stable but delicate condition.”*

“Acknowledged.” Smokescreen closed that channel, opened another, relayed the request for an inspection party, switched to the next. “Ratchet, an incoming Autobot shuttle says they have a patient in stable but delicate condition. I’ll direct them to the forward launch bay.”

*“We’ll meet them there,”* said Ratchet, and cut the channel.

Smokescreen paused when the inspection party was away, and glanced up at Strika.

“You’re doing well,” said Strika.

“I’m supposed to be a commander, not a communications officer! When do I get to do something *interesting?!?*”

“Communication is the most important part of any battle,” said Strika. “What would you do if your communications officer was deactivated in the middle of a fight? A commander should have some proficiency at every one of her crew’s tasks. Specialization is for organics and Autobots.”

Smokescreen blinked up at her, obviously thinking about that. The console crackled.

“*Shuttle’s clean.*”

Smokescreen took a deep ventilation and turned back to work. “Autobot shuttle, you have permission to land. Please proceed to the forward launch bay as indicated by the active beacon, frequency—”

Strika folded her servos behind her and nodded approval. Good. Smokescreen would make an excellent commander, and she’d have to start nudging her into closer proximity to Slipstream. The two needed to learn to rely on each other. They’d make an excellent command team once that happened.

Thundercracker and the newly arrived Trailbreaker also looked promising, though Strika had yet to tweak the duty rosters so she could observe them working together. Thundercracker had far too much arrogance; Trailbreaker had none at all, and if things fell out right, they might complement each other rather than drive each other mad. It was worth a try.

The inspection party’s ping with the crew information arrived, and Strika’s optics went wide. “Inform Lord Megatron,” she said to Smokescreen. “I’ll meet him and Optimus in the forward launch bay.”

---

Dealing with the paperwork was far better with Megatron there than alone. Optimus huffed a contented ventilation and dared to lean slightly into Megatron’s comforting bulk. Megatron made an amused noise, and moved to better accommodate him. Then he snorted, something that had worried Optimus badly the first few times. It sounded like an engine backfiring.

This time, Optimus managed to keep the startled reaction down to a flinch, and asked, “What is it this time?”

“Overlord,” said Megatron. “Turning that mech into a superweapon was the stupidest thing my predecessor ever did. He’s asking for command of an entire space station. He knows what the answer will be, and he’s *still* asking.”

“Ah,” said Optimus, who had only heard stories of Overlord in the Academy, most of which were—he *sincerely* hoped—exaggerated.

“Strika will have to have a word with him,” Megatron went on, shuffling the datapads in front of him. “Anything interesting from your people?”

“A handful of mishaps in the firing range,” said Optimus. “The civilians require training. Though one was due to a Decepticon—is his name *seriously* Misfire?”

“Ah. Him. Let us say that it isn’t a particularly new problem.”

“Well, at least the new arrivals have company, and no one’s been seriously injured.”

“One moment. Comm.” Megatron touched his helm. “Yes, Strika—*what*. I see. We’ll be down immediately.”

Optimus looked up at him quizzically.

“We have new arrivals,” said Megatron, by way of explanation. “You will want to greet them personally.”

Mystified, Optimus rose and followed him to the shuttlebay, and stopped dead in the doorway when he saw who the new arrivals were. His spark squeezed, relief and happiness and something else and he was striding forward before he thought.

Bumblebee and Bulkhead were too busy complaining at Ratchet's ministrations to notice his arrival. When they did, their faceplates lit up. "Hey boss-bot—Uh, boss-bot?"

Optimus strode up and embraced them all, fiercely, ignoring Bumblebee's protests and Ratchet's grumble. How could he have doubted them? He hadn't dared to believe he'd see them all online again, and said as much.

"Yeah, online," said Bumblebee. "It's not going to stay that way if you don't quit squeezing that hard, boss-bot."

"Sorry," said Optimus, releasing them. "I'm just—glad you're here. How did you manage to get out?"

There was an uncomfortable silence. Bumblebee looked at Bulkhead. Bulkhead looked at Bumblebee.

"Uh, boss?" said Bumblebee. "Promise you won't freak?"

And Jazz stepped out from the shuttle, faceplates set, shoulders stiff. Optimus stared, not quite daring to believe the input from his optics.

"Ratchet," Jazz said, unusually somber, looking at Megatron and nowhere else, "we have a fourth passenger who will need your attention." His throat cabling worked as he reset his vocalizer. "Optimus, I place myself in your custody, and whatever current knowledge I possess at your disposal."

"Why?" said Optimus, the only thing that came to processor. There was undeniable hatred in the way Jazz looked at Megatron, undeniable fear in the way he stood. He was the head of Autobot Intelligence. He could hardly expect good treatment in Decepticon servos.

"I became a little better acquainted with Sentinel's M.O.," said Jazz, and now he did look at Optimus. "Especially as it pertained to you."

"Me?" said Optimus, tank lurching as he felt every optic in the room focus on him. Jazz, however, looked away.

"It's not the Cybertron I want to live on," said Jazz, then, more quietly, "And not what Prowl would have wanted."

"I..." Optimus looked around. What did Jazz mean about Sentinel? He didn't mean... Oh Primus, even thinking it was like saying it out loud, and he hoped no one else would even think... His gaze darted to Megatron, who seemed completely unmoved, meeting Jazz's hatred with quiet evaluation. "Thank you, Jazz."

"You do understand that we'll have to confine you with some security," said Strika, folding her arms. "We can hardly have you running about on the ship before we know if we can trust you."

"Hey, that's not fair!" said Bumblebee. "He risked his *function* to get us all off Cybertron, and you're going to stick him in the brig—!"

"No, no. It's cool," said Jazz, raising his servos. "I understand."



Optimus wanted to protest, but Strika was right. “It’ll be temporary, and I know for a fact it was just cleaned. Punishment duty for blowing up half the firing range.”

Was that a touch of grim humor on Jazz’s faceplate? He thought so. But whatever Jazz was getting up to, they had to figure it out soon.

“I’ll see you there shortly,” he added. He didn’t quite dare to put a servo on Jazz’s shoulder—it seemed somehow presumptuous—but he did smile, genuine relief. “And Jazz...Thank you.”

---

They had quite a good little setup here. That explained the size of the shuttle; it was a repurposed medical transport. And what lay in the middle of the protective web of tie-downs, clamps, and other various restraints stopped him dead.

“I thought they said he was *dead*,” said First Aid. “Physical trauma stressing the spark to burnout.”

“Well, obviously not,” said Ratchet, looking at the monitor. “Stable but critical. Definitely Pharma’s handiwork. No one else could manage something this good. We’ll scan for processor alterations as soon as we’re in the medical bay. For the meantime, lend a servo and be careful about it. Agent Blurr’s been through enough.”

## Chapter 43

“And above all else,” said Ratchet, looking down at the carefully-repaired patchy plating of the mech in the berth, “we’ll need to make sure Shockwave isn’t around when he wakes up.”

Shockwave cocked his helm at Ratchet. It was unsettling how plaintive he could manage to look, even with only one optic to do so with.

“Don’t give me that,” said Ratchet. “I saw the incident report. Putting someone through a trash compactor is not considered a sign of affection in Autobot society, Shockwave.”

“I was doing what was necessary to carry out my orders,” said Shockwave.

“Yes, and you know better than to think that’ll fly with me,” said Ratchet. “Now, about Thundercracker’s repairs—”

His desk console beeped, an incoming message. “Slag it all,” he said, and went to answer.

*“I have an incoming transmission for you, sir,”* said the young Autobot on watch. *“From an Autobot vessel, Omega Supreme. Would you like me to put it through?”*

*Oh slag,* thought Ratchet again, tanks lurching. “Yes,” he said.

The screen changed, and there was Arcee, sitting in Omega’s command chair. “*Mister,*” she said, *“you have a lot of explaining to do. To both of us.”*

*Oh no.* “I do,” said Ratchet. Thank Primus Shockwave was out of the pickup, but Ratchet could still feel his interested gaze. This was not a call he wanted to take in public, but it was too late now.

*“Well, you’re going to have to do it in person,”* said Arcee. *“We’ll arrive within the week. Professor Sumdac’s sending the tool he said you were interested in.”*

Oh good, he was going to get his plating peeled but at least he’d have the satisfaction of handing Ambulon the tool that might repair Skywarp before Arcee took him down to his component systems. At least he wouldn’t have offlined in vain. Small mercies.

“Thank you,” he said aloud. “And really, Arcee, I can explain.”

*“I look forward to it,”* rumbled Omega. Ratchet winced, feeling like the worst person in the universe.

The transmission ended. Ratchet let out a long ventilation.

“Ah,” said Shockwave. “Perhaps we might be able to examine Arcee’s repairs. They may give us insight into further possible methods for helping Skywarp and the other victims of Pharma’s experiments.”

Ratchet turned a disbelieving stare on him. “You’re joking.”

“I am not,” said Shockwave.

“You hacked her,” said Ratchet. “Do you really think she’ll ever want you fiddling around her processor ever again?”

“But for the sake of repairing other bots, it’s only logical...”

“Don’t,” said Ratchet. “Just don’t. Don’t ask. Don’t approach her. You’ll wind up getting kicked in the interface array.”

“Surely she wouldn’t be so unreasonable!”

“It’s not being unreasonable,” said Ratchet. “It’s not unreasonable at all to dislike someone who *kidnapped* and *hacked* you. Or *threw you in a trash compactor*.”

“Agent Blurr ran into that of his own volition,” Shockwave pointed out, primly.

“You still crushed him and tried to incinerate him. If you can’t recognize why a mech would be reluctant to spend time around you for that, the problem’s with you, not with him. Now come on. We have Jazz’s scans to examine.”

---

“What do we do with him?” asked Optimus, looking at the security feed from the brig. Jazz sat with his arms folded and face still.

“He’s a security risk,” said Megatron, leaning over his shoulder. “It might be a trap—though, sending the head of Autobot Intelligence seems unusually stupid.”

“It’s not the sort of thing Sentinel does,” said Optimus. “He’d never be able to get past sending the head of Autobot Intelligence. He’d be more likely to deny that they’d need to resort to a trick entirely. He’s too convinced of Autobot superiority.”

“You think he’s telling the truth.”

“I’d like to think so,” said Optimus, condemned by his own honesty. “And I’d like to think that he wouldn’t have brought Prowl into it otherwise.”

Megatron made a thoughtful noise. “And then there’s the matter of the badly injured member of the group.”

“Agent Blurr.”

“Indeed. Shockwave delivered a full report on his interactions with him. I gather it would be best to keep the two of them separate.”

“A very good idea,” said Optimus. “A greater issue will be Arcee’s arrival with Omega Supreme.”

Megatron’s face stilled. “You didn’t mention that earlier,” he said, very carefully.

“Ratchet just commed me. In light of that...”

“The requirements of war,” said Megatron, “are often unpleasant.”

“Yeah, I’ve heard that before.” Optimus realized what he’d said and tensed, expecting Megatron to object or worse.

Instead, Megatron just stared at him. “You want me to apologize?”

Relief, and a bit of guilt, swept through Optimus. Megatron’s reaction was better than he had expected, given his rudeness. “Yes. It’s not as if you can do much more than that.”

Megatron ex-vented heavily. "I will see what I can do."

"Thank you," said Optimus. It wasn't as if he could have asked for any more. "I need to talk with him."

"Be careful," said Megatron, and gave him a small grim smile. "We wouldn't want to strain Ratchet's patience."

*Very funny*, Optimus *almost* said, but stopped himself before he could push his luck with Megatron's patience twice in the same conversation.

---

He found Jazz sitting in the same attitude, deactivated the bars before anything else. "Jazz," he started, and then didn't know what else to say.

Jazz looked down at his servos. "I'm sorry," he said.

"You did your duty," said Optimus. "When the alternative was joining the Decepticons. I can't blame you for that."

"Do you know what that duty entailed?" said Jazz.

Optimus thought back to the shuttle explosion, that recording of the protest, and was silent.

"Yeah, I didn't think you meant that," said Jazz. "I'm not asking you to trust me. I wouldn't, if I were you."

"Then why are you here?"

"Because it was the only decent thing to do," said Jazz. "I'll give you any information I can. Whether it's useful or not, that's up to you. But I'm not going to be complicit in Sentinel's crimes. Never again." His optics lifted to Optimus's faceplate. "And I'm sorry. For arresting you. I knew it was the wrong person, but that was who the warrant was for."

"No. It was better that way; Ratchet managed a lot more than I would have," said Optimus.

"And I had no idea about...about Sentinel."

Optimus's tanks clenched. Why did he have to keep mentioning that? "You had no way of knowing. It's in the past." He hoped there wasn't any sound monitoring here. What if Megatron started asking questions? He certainly knew that Optimus had shared Sentinel's berth, but if he knew the circumstances, he'd know Optimus was a coward, more willing to whore himself than to fight.

Jazz just looked at him. He looked away, unable to meet Jazz's optics. "Were there other factors?"

"Yes," said Jazz. The door to the cells slid open. Ratchet stepped in, a handful of datapads in his servos.

"Oh," he said. "I'll just leave you two alone, shall I?"

"Don't," said Jazz. "You'll probably want to hear this too. I didn't want to do this. I tried to record one of Sentinel's rants. I thought that if the Council heard what he was saying, what he was ordering, they'd have to remove him. I never got the chance. Once I reached my office, I was ambushed." He paused, looked from one to the other. "By a bot who called herself Trepan."

The datapads clattered to the floor. Optimus turned to stare at Ratchet, who stood with a stricken

expression on his faceplate. “Ratchet?”

“You’re sure it was her?” said Ratchet. “You’re *sure*?”

“I never actually saw her,” said Jazz. “She said she hacked people, could change memories. One of my informants told me the rest.”

“Frag.” Ratchet ran a servo over his faceplate, then said into his comms, “Megatron, get down here. You’ll want to hear this.”

“I don’t understand,” said Optimus.

“Be glad you don’t,” said Ratchet. “*Frag*, and here I hoped she’d been squashed by something during the war. I hope it’s an impersonator.”

“My sources didn’t think so,” said Jazz.

“Trepan—no wonder Pharma got funding for his little horror show, if the original is out and about.”

“One thing,” said Jazz. “From what I heard, she doesn’t work for the Council.”

“She never did,” said Ratchet. “She works for bigger people.”

“The sort of big that doesn’t use names,” said Jazz, a wry twist to his intake.

“Someone wants Sentinel to stay in power,” said Ratchet. “I was right. There is a King Rat.”

“Uh.” Optimus looked from one to the other. “There’s a very large organic vermin running Cybertron?”

“Earth turn of phrase, kid,” said Ratchet. “Think about it. You know Sentinel. You know he couldn’t lead his way out of a wet paper bag unless it got caught on his chin. You know how eager the Council was to have him in power last time. His sole virtue is that he’s easy to manipulate. You hand him a few petty victories—over you, for instance—and he’s a happy mech. He’s a figurehead. Which means, even if we win, even if we conquer Cybertron, the problem will come back. Maybe within orns. Maybe millennia. But we won’t have won. Not until we address the root of the problem.”

The doors slid open. “What is it, medic?” said Megatron, Strika close behind him.

“Tell them what you told us,” said Ratchet.

Jazz did.

Something changed in Megatron’s expression, as if he’d closed down behind his optics. “You’re sure.”

“On what information I have, yeah,” said Jazz.

“What did she look like?”

“I couldn’t see her, but big. And she had—what’s the organic term—tentacles.”

“It would be wiser to proceed as if he were correct,” rumbled Strika. “Ratchet. Check his coding. Note any modifications, especially those made recently, or any made consecutively.”

“But that’s highly invasive,” said Ratchet.

“Do it,” said Megatron. “My apologies, Jazz. But until we know if she succeeded in altering your personality core, we cannot trust you.”

“So that’s what she does,” said Jazz, eying Ratchet suspiciously.

“You could be a walking bomb and not even know it,” said Strika. “We can’t risk it. We’ve already had enough trouble with Pharma’s hamfisted servowork. Trepan is far worse.”

“Fine,” said Jazz, sounding resigned. “Go for it, doc.”

While Ratchet busied himself with the preparations, Optimus looked at Megatron and Strika. “Who’s Trepan?”

“She changes processors. Everything to do with them. She can rewrite everything you are, pull any scrap of informations she wants out of your processor, plant new memories, *anything*,” said Strika, while Megatron’s servos clenched. “And she loves it.”

“I was on the receiving end of her ministrations. Once,” said Megatron. “Fortunately, she didn’t have the necessary time to make any real changes. We checked. If he’s telling the truth, if she attacked him, we have every reason to trust him.”

“You ready, kid?” said Ratchet.

“Just do it,” said Jazz, opening a jack on his wrist.

Ratchet plugged a cable with a datapad on the other end in, and waited. “No major consecutive changes made since we left Cybertron,” he said after a few ventilations.

Megatron and Strika visibly relaxed. “Good,” said Megatron. “If you’re right...”

“If Trepan’s still running around,” said Optimus, “why are they doing research on mind manipulation?”

There was a pause.

“Because someone doesn’t trust Trepan anymore,” said Strika.

“Or never did.” Ratchet snorted. “Apparently, there’s more to this than meets the optic sensor. Maybe the Council isn’t so happy with Trepan and her employers.”

“Speculation,” said Megatron. “But worth consideration. *I* wouldn’t trust Trepan if we had her.”

Jazz reset his vocalizer. He looked somewhat shaken. “One other thing,” he said. “Of immediate interest. The Halcyon Junction.”

“Yes?” said Megatron.

“They’re fortifying it. With the power of the Allspark behind it, that spacebridge can send ships throughout the known universe.”

“Isn’t that what spacebridges do?” muttered Ratchet.

“You haven’t listened to Bulkhead much, have you?” said Jazz. “While spacebridges may seem to warp people from place to place at random—or within certain parameters—they really follow certain

rules. They 'like' certain coordinates better than others. You can set some bridges for other coordinates all you like, but they're still going to dump you out at their 'preferred ones'. They follow the path of least resistance, and it takes a lot of energy to coax them out of it. This spacebridge you're sitting on, the BX Junction, services Cybertron itself, Earth, and one of the outlying colony worlds. Try setting it for, say, Cardassia Prime, or even Qo'noS, proximal as it is, and you'll still wind up on Cybertron, Earth, or that colony world. That time you wound up warping randomly around the galaxy? That wasn't random at all, that was the device in question following the usual 'paths' spacebridges use—though unconnected to a set bridge at intersecting 'paths', it was unrestrained and could follow those 'paths' to a much greater extent than if tethered in location to one particular spacebridge at the intersection of these 'paths'." He stood. "And if you want a better explanation, you'd better ask Bulkhead."

"No," said Megatron, looking like he had a helmache. "I don't want a better explanation. I cannot understand half what Bulkhead says in any case."

"The difference between the Halcyon Junction and the BX, Cybertron or Earth Junctions is that it lies at the intersection of an unusual quantity of paths," said Jazz. "And with the power of the Allspark behind it, it can 'climb out' of those paths and go elsewhere, unconstrained by those paths. Frag, if you hooked the Allspark up to the BX Junction, you could probably get to Qo'noS or Cardassia just fine."

"So if we leave it in Autobot servos..."

"They'll be able to go anywhere, unrestrained, and turn up where you least expect or want them," said Jazz. "Fuel for thought."

Optimus looked at Megatron. They processed that. Fuel for thought indeed.

"I'll check it against our intelligence reports," said Strika. "If you're right..."

"I'm right," said Jazz. "I wish I weren't."

## Chapter 44

"It's really strange," said Bulkhead later that day. "All these Decepticons keep flirting with me. Like, lots of them."

"I always said it'd take a Decepticon to think you're pretty, Bulk," said Bumblebee, and Ratchet gritted his dentae and resisted the urge to apply a wrench upside the scout's foolish little helm.

"And they don't seem to be joking," said Bulkhead. "Or acting like they're doing me a big favor, and like I should be grateful. Some of them were *Seekers*, even."

"Of course they mean it," snapped Ratchet. "They're Decepticons. You look like a warframe, Bulkhead. Of course they think you're hot stuff."

"Wait, you're saying cuz Bulkhead's big and can't fit through doors the Decepticons think he's cuter than *me*?"

"And Optimus too, if that makes you feel any better," said Ratchet. "Bulkhead's got a frontliner build. They like that. Optimus has a scaled-down version of the old officer frames. Not as interesting to Decepticons, no matter what Autobots think. Cultural differences, Bumblebee, get used to them."

Bulkhead had a very thoughtful look on his faceplate. "You mean they really think I'm hot?"

"Yes, I just said that. The fact that you're the greatest processor in the history of spacebridge technology doesn't hurt, either."

That thoughtful look grew.

Ratchet watched it grow, sighed. "And yes, you're up on all your inoculations and aren't carrying any infections. Have fun."

"Thanks, Ratch!" Bulkhead grinned and headed out the door. Bumblebee lingered. "Gee, I didn't guess Bulk was a spike mech."

"He doesn't have to be," said Ratchet.

"He should be waiting, then. I mean, it's all very well for *me* or *Optimus* but valve mecha shouldn't 'face around! Their mates will be able to *tell*."

"Decepticons don't care, and they're a lot more sensible than you are," said Ratchet, wondering if he were very, very good if he could be a fly on the wall the day Bumblebee found out that Optimus wasn't a spike mech. "Neither does Bulkhead. He grew up on an *energon farm*, Bumblebee. He's not going to be as squeamish about interface as you are."

"Squeamish? Who said I'm squeamish? I'm just used to proper behavior!"

Ratchet snorted. "You and proper behavior haven't ever had more than a passing acquaintance, let alone a chance to get used to each other. Did you really swallow all that slag they fueled you with in boot camp?"

"I swallowed *nothing*."

Ratchet managed to keep his faceplate devoid of expression at that one. "Then stop running your vocalizer before someone pulls it out. You got a reason to be here, kid?"



Bumblebee looked down and shuffled his stabilizers. “Is Blurr gonna wake up?” Before Ratchet could get a word in, he went on, “I mean, it’s not like I like him or anything, he’s such a crankshaft, but it was kind of my fault how his cover got blown and he got dragged into our mission and got caught by Shockwave and *I still want to race him.*”

“Enough, kid,” said Ratchet. “He’s gonna be fine. He’ll roll out of here on his own wheels within the week. We’re just letting him come out of stasis on his own so everything integrates properly. You two will have plenty of opportunity to get on everyone’s circuits.”

“Oh,” said Bumblebee. “That’s good.”

Ratchet watched him go, and shook his helm. The kid’s spark was in the right place. It was just packaged in layers of irritating personality.

---

Optimus looked over the various intelligence reports in front of him and ex-vented. “Our intelligence reports match Jazz’s account more or less exactly, but I’m still not sure...”

“That he’s not lying? Very true,” said Megatron. “Unfortunately, there’s no ethical way to confirm it.”

Optimus glanced sidelong at him. “We’re not hacking him.”

“Of course not,” said Megatron. “We’d alienate him if he was indeed sympathetic, and give him a further reason to turn on us if he’s a spy.”

“Sorry,” said Optimus. Megatron looked at him oddly.

“You’re not supposed to agree with me all the time,” he said.

“I uh.” Optimus looked down.

“There’s no requirement for you to be more than usually agreeable to me simply because we’re courting. We’re equals. Both on the battlefield,” Megatron put down the datapad he’d been reading, and lifted Optimus’s servo to his intake, pressing a gentle kiss to the back of Optimus’s knuckles, “and here.”

“Equals,” said Optimus, a little startled. *Cybertronians need order*, that long-ago instructor’s voice reminded him. *Even if there are only two, one will follow the other. And while this might be put aside for administrative purposes, it is unnatural, and we always will—indeed, should—revert to that behavior in our intimate relationships.*

Did Decepticons not revert to such behavior? It was a bit much to wrap his processor around. Perhaps Megatron was reminding him that he couldn’t let their relationship get in the way of running things.

That made sense. They were on familiar ground, then.

And Megatron still held his servo, looking at it as if it were something precious. “We’ll release Jazz,” he said, sounding as if his processor were very much elsewhere. “We can have someone discreetly keep an optic on him to ensure he’s not about to tear apart our engines or something similar. Perhaps he and Shockwave might consult, if they’re not likely to tear each other to pieces.”

“They might be,” said Optimus. His interface components were warming. All Megatron was doing was holding his servo. How was that even possible? Certainly, they were in Megatron’s quarters, but

in the standard captain's receiving room. He'd been in Ultra Magnus's receiving room a thousand times, there wasn't anything indecent about it.

Megatron's optics flicked down to the pile of datapads. "My work will tolerate a pause if yours will."

Was that an invitation? The very thought had his full array coming online faster than was decent. Megatron's other servo came up to cradle his helm, and on an impulse he turned his faceplate to nuzzle and kiss the inside of Megatron's wrist.

He looked up, at Megatron leaning over him, and moved forward to kiss him. Megatron's intake pressed hot over his, his glossa pushing in. Optimus opened to admit him, reveled in the hot heat of it, pushed back. Megatron growled into his intake and both servos caught Optimus's frame and all but lifted him into the other mech's lap.

Those servos were wonderful. Optimus hadn't imagined that servos that big could be so deft, that Megatron could be so gentle with his claws. He moaned, tried to reciprocate, certain he did a pretty poor job of it. Megatron broke the kiss to mouth his way down Optimus's neck, nibbling on the armor, working his way back to suck on an audial fin. Optimus gasped, hips jerking forward. He hadn't realized his fins were so sensitive!

One of Megatron's servos cupped his aft, stroking over the plating covering his valve. Optimus found himself bucking into it. He stopped himself, that was utterly unseemly, but Megatron lifted his intake away and said, "No need to be shy," and Optimus stopped caring about decency. He was already unsealed, everyone knew it, there was no reason not to follow through, and he *wanted this*. A little self-consciously, he went back to rubbing his panel against Megatron's servo. Megatron's digits crooked, and he gasped.

"Shall we take this to the berth?" purred Megatron into his audial.

"Yes," gasped Optimus. "Yes, please."

Megatron picked him up bodily, that wonderful servo still under his aft, and strode into the berthroom, the door folding open in front of them as if it were aware of their urgency. Optimus clung to him, his arousal growing unbearably.

Megatron bent and set him gently on the berth. Optimus lay back, Megatron's fingers teasing every sensitive bit of wiring in reach. It was all he could do to retain the presence of processor needed to cant his hips correctly and spread his legs in the appropriate manner before his panel slid back, exposing and drawing attention to his valve rather than his spike. As liberal as Megatron seemed, he doubted he would take well to being propositioned to be spiked. Especially by someone so much smaller.

He eyed the length of Megatron's spike and suppressed a twinge of nervousness—it would hurt, certainly, Sentinel had, but it was worth it. It was Megatron. He moved his hands into the expected position, on the berth to either side of his shoulders, and waited.

"Optimus..." Low, hesitant. Megatron had stopped moving above him and was looking down at him with concern. "Optimus, you don't need—that is—" He seemed clearly at a loss for words. Finally, almost blurted, "Why?"

Why? Optimus reset his optics several times, utterly confused. "I'm...I'm the smaller partner," he said. "I'm supposed to submit to you. It's...I shouldn't...I'd *never* presume to proposition you with, uh," he gestured to his spike, feeling the charge ebb from his systems.

“So you’re supposed to *present* like...” Megatron trailed off, then gave up, shook his helm and ventilated heavily.

“I don’t understand,” said Optimus. “Have I done something offensive?” He closed his panel and drew his legs up to his body, feeling abruptly foolish and presumptive.

The berth creaked as Megatron settled himself on it, and a large servo found his. “No,” said Megatron after a moment, and Optimus didn’t relax; there was still an edge to his voice.

“But...I don’t understand,” Optimus said again. “If—if not that, how...” He couldn’t quite form the words—did Megatron take his partners in a different position? The idea was worrying. He had no idea what he was supposed to do.

“What do you prefer?” asked Megatron, and looked at him. “I don’t mean what you’ve been taught is correct interfacing behavior—” his mouth curled into a fleeting sneer, “but rather what *you* find pleasant.”

Optimus stared at him and could find nothing to say.

“Please tell me that wasn’t your *only*—” Megatron checked himself, glanced at the floor as if calling on Primus, and let out a heavy ventilation. “Of course.”

“Of course what?” demanded Optimus, becoming angry in his own right. He had no idea what he’d done wrong or why Megatron was irritated, and it was utterly *unfair*. What did Megatron *expect* out of him? He was an officer, not a courtesan—Megatron should have known better than to expect anything more refined from him.

“I—never mind.”

“Of course *what*?” demanded Optimus again. “I’m not a courtesan!”

“I didn’t mean to imply that you were. Only that—” he gestured at Optimus. “This is unnecessary.”

Optimus huddled up around himself and glared. “Unnecessary? How? I’m not—I’m—”

Megatron settled next to him. “I was taken aback, that’s all,” he said gently. “I didn’t expect for you to, uh, present to such a degree.”

“I...” Optimus looked down. Wonderful. They hadn’t even interfaced, and somehow he’d already done something wrong, even though he was following all the etiquette, everything a proper valve mech was supposed to do. He couldn’t get anything right, and Megatron wouldn’t *tell* him how he’d fragged up. The unfairness of it hurt. Like those first few days on Earth, but worse, far, far worse. Earth, he’d had an excuse! It was an alien planet! But here, when it mattered, he fragged up.

“I’m not accustomed to such expectations,” Megatron was saying. “I wasn’t expecting it to be so formal.”

Optimus looked at him, and all the hurt turned to anger. Was he saying he expected Optimus to act like a courtesan after all? Decent mecha didn’t—

He stood. The roiling emotions in his spark made the prospect of remaining unbearable. “I’m sorry,” he said, didn’t mean it. How could Megatron expect that? “I should go.”

And went, with only the faintest impression of Megatron’s startled faceplate as he left the room.

## Chapter 45

“And *that*,” said Ratchet, “is how the Magnus Hammer wound up in Ultra’s servos. Funny enough it worked; it can be quite picky about finding the right bearer. Even Optimus told me he had a Pit of a time getting it to behave for him.”

“Fascinating,” said Strika. “So the old weapon of the Protectors became the symbol of the supreme ruler of Cybertron.”

“As did the title of Magnus,” said Ratchet. “They *said* they did a few tests on the Matrix and that it wasn’t able to bond to anyone again, but sometimes I wonder. Primes are hard to control.”

“No wonder Optimus made people nervous, then. A Prime would easily displace Sentinel.”

“Exactly why our king rat would want to cripple or offline him.” Ratchet became aware of a presence over his shoulder. “Hello, Megatron.”

“What happened with Sentinel?”

Ratchet looked up at him. Megatron stood in front of him, arms folded, optics narrowed to blazing slits. “What do you mean?”

“Sentinel and Optimus. What happened?”

“You should be asking Optimus that,” he said. Next to him, Strika quietly absented herself from the conversation and vanished out the med bay door. Coward.

“I don’t expect an accurate response,” said Megatron.

Ratchet gave him a long blank look.

“Your esteemed little leader acted as if he believed I expected no more than for him to play the ‘face toy,’” said Megatron. “The position he took on would have made a pleasure drone protest, and he was horrified when he found that it wasn’t what I expected of him. There’s only one place where he would have learned that slag. So, medic. What can you tell me about Sentinel?”

“Nothing that medical privacy would allow me to relate,” said Ratchet. Megatron bristled, and he raised a servo to forestall the outburst of righteous rage and said, “However, I can illuminate some of the, ah, stranger bits of Autobot interfacing etiquette.”

“You mean that was normal?” Megatron looked startled.

Ratchet gestured to the seat Strika had vacated. “Sit down. I’ll get crimped lines in my neck if I have to keep looking up at you like that. I take it from your reaction that you haven’t had much to do with the Autobot military aside from blowing them up.”

“The researchers assigned to us didn’t have much interest in discussing their interface lives,” said Megatron, rather wryly.

Ratchet snorted. “Sounds like you didn’t see much of Pharma. He *boasts*. Without much basis.”

“Speaking from experience, are you?”

“Now you’re just being rude.” Ratchet gave him a crooked smile. “In any case, Autobot culture—

particularly military culture—has undergone a massive shift since you last spent any time being, hah, intimate with it.”

“Go on.”

“Young mecha of Optimus’s generation are being told that our species craves a hierarchy. If you put two mecha in a room, the theory goes, one will naturally want to follow the other. It is what we’re programmed to do, and while we can resist it if necessary—in military situations that require collaboration, for example—it’s unnatural to do so, and it should certainly not be resisted in informal, social circumstances. It’s actively harmful to mecha’s relationships.”

“Even in berth,” said Megatron, flatly.

“Particularly in berth,” said Ratchet. “The more intimate the relationship, the more important that each partner knows xir place.”

“That sounds like Functionist propaganda,” said Megatron.

“Oh, it *is*,” said Ratchet. “And since it’s the Functionists returning like a bad organic foodstuff, one’s form dictates function. Valve mecha submit.”

“Valve mecha?” said Megatron. “Have they started designing models with only a spike or valve?”

“No,” said Ratchet. “But for Optimus’s generation, your first sexual encounter dictates your role in the rest of your interface life.”

Megatron’s expression of puzzlement grew. “But spike seals are broken in the first round of upgrades. How do you *tell*?”

“The presence or absence of the valve seal is the determining factor,” said Ratchet.

“You’re joking. That’s absurd. Even Autobots aren’t that stupid.”

“Functionists,” said Ratchet. “And technically, mecha aren’t supposed to interface outside of a bond—bonds are far more common than not among Autobots, after all—but as you pointed out, the spike seal gets knocked off in the normal sequence of events regardless of sexual activity. So that, too, hinges on the valve seal.”

Megatron groaned and actually put his helm in his servos.

“Optimus is, as you found, a valve mech,” said Ratchet. “And that’s why he was displaced as Magnus. They could prove that he’d interfaced outside of a bond—and gave Sentinel the benefit of the doubt, because he still had his valve seal.”

Megatron raised a servo. “Enough. I am becoming stupider just *listening* to this slag.”

“Oh, no, you don’t get off that easily,” said Ratchet. “See, a Magnus needs to be able to make a bond. And who’d want a mech who been sharing himself around? Besides, Optimus was a valve mech, which meant his *instinct* is to submit. You can’t have a Magnus *submitting* to people.”

Megatron snorted. “You don’t need a valve to submit.”

“Yes, well, it’s fallen out of favor,” said Ratchet. “In any case, Optimus’s first encounter was with Sentinel, and he happened to use his valve, which in their current lack of wisdom translates to him having to be submissive.”

Megatron snorted again. “What a limited life Autobots lead, to be sure.”

“And, if you’re interfacing properly,” said Ratchet, raising his voice over Megatron’s, “there are very particular things you ought to do. Only courtesans or pleasure drones do anything other than insert tab A into slot B and thrust. There are even proper positions to take. Now, the general population is fairly lax about these standards. It’s something everyone disobeys and feels faintly shifty about—shifty enough to come down like a ton of rectangular building things on any public figure who’s revealed to have broken them. But the *military* gets fanatic about them. It’s a rigid structure, and it lends itself well to, ah, maintaining standards.”

“Oh,” said Megatron, looking rather taken aback. “That...clarifies matters.”

“And that’s what you put your stabilizer into,” said Ratchet. “Even more so since Optimus has already run afoul of these expectations.”

“Thank you for the clarification,” said Megatron, rising. “I have...things to attend to.”

Ratchet watched him go and wondered how many more times he was going to have to give that lecture.

---

“Optimus!”

The call brought Optimus up short, panic clenching his tanks, but he couldn’t very well run away.

He wished the previous night had never happened, that he’d never been bold enough to ask Megatron anything. Of course it had gone wrong! These things always went wrong! He’d been a fool, and of course he’d ruined it, of course Megatron hadn’t seen him as an equal partner but a pay-bot, who’d expect otherwise of a bot who flung himself into another’s berth so rapidly!

Why would Megatron want to see him again?

He forced himself to turn and look at Megatron. He’d done worse, he reminded himself. Megatron at least didn’t look angry, though most of the time Sentinel hadn’t needed to look angry to be vicious. He squared his shoulders.

“I believe I owe you an apology,” said Megatron.

Optimus stared at him, feeling as if the ground had been yanked out from under his stabilizers. “What?”

Megatron glanced up and down the corridor, making sure there wasn’t anyone to overhear. “I was unfamiliar with Autobot etiquette,” he said. “And so I reacted very badly and very rudely. I am sorry.”

“I...” Optimus didn’t know what to say. His spark beat fast. Megatron meant this?

“I had no intention of treating you in any other way than a respected partner,” said Megatron. “Due to my unfamiliarity with Autobot etiquette, I fear I did exactly that. I ask your pardon for my rudeness.” He offered a servo. After a hesitation, Optimus took it. Megatron bent to press a kiss to it, his intake warm.

“I didn’t think that...I mean...I...there’s no need,” Optimus managed, and his helm jerked up at the sound of stabilizers on decking further down the corridor, quite possibly the rest of the mecha on his duty shift arriving back to their quarters. “Should we discuss this somewhere more private?”

“Perhaps we should,” said Megatron, and gestured for Optimus to lead the way. After a moment, Optimus recovered himself enough to say, “I’m sorry too. I didn’t mean... I’m sorry I ran away like that from you.”

Megatron chuckled. “Braver mecha than us have quailed on the battlefield of romance.”

Optimus couldn’t help the laugh, hastily covered his intake with a servo. It was so ridiculous, and a glance up at Megatron’s faceplate set him laughing in earnest. Megatron somehow managed to be more restrained, but his grin was utterly evil. They reached the door of his quarters, and he touched the entry code, then caught Optimus around the waist and swung him in, leaned down and kissed him. Optimus reached up and caught the sides of his helm in both servos, and kissed back. Megatron’s intake opened to admit him, yielding.

After what seemed like a blissful eternity, they parted. Megatron’s servo cradled his helm, careful and considerate. Megatron smiled down at him. “Thank you,” he said. “For forgiving my earlier rudeness.”

“There was nothing to forgive,” said Optimus, spark beating fast. Warmth bloomed between his legs at that smile, and he looked down, embarrassed. “Just... thank you.”

Megatron kissed the top of his helm and pulled him close. “Don’t be ashamed. Our relationship will involve as much or as little physical intimacy as you wish.”

“But I *do* want physical intimacy!” said Optimus, surprising himself with the force of it. “I just don’t want to frag it up, like last time!”

Megatron snorted. “Don’t take responsibility for everything, Optimus. That was as much my fault as it was yours.” He bent to be on a level with Optimus, smiling. “And there was no harm from it, not to me. Do not fret yourself. Besides, ‘facing generally involves rather a lot of fragging up. We had to pull Strika and Lugnut out of the engines once, because they rolled off the walkway.”

“You’re making that up,” said Optimus.

“Ask Strika to show you the scars,” said Megatron. “Though I will warn you, some are rather intimately placed.”

“Oh,” said Optimus.

“And Starscream put out one of my optics once, with an infortuitously placed wing,” Megatron continued. “If both parties are happy and consenting and no one ends up in the medbay, it’s nothing to worry about.”

“I don’t want to hurt you!”

“And I do not want to hurt you. We’ll both be careful. Besides, you don’t have wings to put in my optics. You dictate the pace, Optimus.”

Optimus tried not to think about damaged optics or engines, leaned up and kissed Megatron full on the intake before he could second-guess himself.

Megatron’s optics went very wide.

“Is the door locked?” Optimus asked.

“Yes,” said Megatron. “Do you want—”

“Yes, I want to.” He looked up at Megatron, servos knotting behind his back. “I...care about you, and want to be intimate with you.” *There, Optimus, he thought, good job at choosing the most stilted, awkward wording possible.*

But Megatron just smiled, and took his servo in his own and kissed the back of it. “You honor me greatly,” he said, and as far as Optimus could tell, he was being absolutely sincere. “What would you like to do?”

Optimus looked away, the nervousness swamping him again. “I...” What else was there to do than frag? There were other things, but only pay-bots engaged in them, and he had *no idea*—

“May I try something on you?” asked Megatron, gently. “I think you will like it, and there is little chance of either of us misplacing a wing.”

The heat in his components flared, a heat mirroring the weight of Megatron’s hand at the small of his back. He was still nervous, but the way Megatron was looking at him made his circuits sing, made excitement rise in every inch of his frame. Megatron didn’t hold his inexperience against him. And having him lead the way was somehow vastly comforting.

He nodded.

“Do you prefer your valve or your spike, when you self-service?” asked Megatron, and the forwardness made heat rush to Optimus’s faceplates.

“My valve, usually,” he said. “I uh, I don’t get as far with my spike, usually.”

“Very well,” said Megatron. “Then I would like your permission to pleasure your valve with my intake and glossa.”

Optimus stared at him, both appalled and unexpectedly aroused at the statement, delivered without any trace of embarrassment. Then he caught the amused slant of Megatron’s optics, the quirk of his intake.

*He fragging enjoys saying things like that!*

Megatron was still waiting for a response. His components pinged him, already fully online.

“Yes,” he said.

Megatron grinned in response, and led him back to his berth. “Sit down on the edge,” he said, and knelt as Optimus scooted himself up and onto it. “Lie back or sit, whichever you prefer.”

Optimus braced himself on his hands, spread his stabilizers, and looked down at Megatron, who smiled back at him and pressed a kiss to the inside of his knee.

Optimus gasped and his panels sprang open, spike and valve together. Megatron hummed deep in his intake and kissed him again, further up the thigh. “You’re lovely,” he said, leaning back and looking at Optimus, a frank and somehow gentle regard.

Optimus wasn’t sure what to say to that.

Megatron didn’t seem to expect a response, kissing and nibbling his way up Optimus’s thigh, glancing up at him to check his reactions. Optimus made a little noise like a moan, hastily stifled, and his valve clenched on air. Megatron purred, intake pressed against the plating of his inner thigh, and he felt it in his valve, shook and whined at the sensation.



Megatron looked up at him again, optics narrow with amusement, and a large, hot glossa swiped over the outside of his valve. Optimus gasped with shock, and a big servo took him by the hip to steady him.

Optimus offlined his optics and lost himself to the sensations, heat and wet and pressure over his valve, pausing to swirl and suck at his anterior node.

He was shaking before long, and then Megatron *purred* again, sending vibrations all through him, and the tip of that glossa probed into him, stretch and shocking pleasure, and his arms went out from under him as the overload took him.

It was several moments before he mustered the energy to do so much as reset his optics. Megatron got to his stabilizers and leaned over him, faceplate wet with fluids and slightly singed from the transfer of energy. “Thank you,” he said.

“Thank you,” said Optimus, heedless of the static in his voice. “I...I hardly ever overload so easily. How—”

“Practice,” said Megatron, grinning broadly.

Optimus lay back on the berth, still panting. He felt limp and delightfully exhausted, and he wasn’t sure if he could get up if he tried. Everything felt like it was trembling.

Megatron stroked his faceplate, lay down next to him, and put a gentle servo on his abdomen, stroking the plating there. Optimus hummed, content, and burrowed in against Megatron’s side. “What about you?” he managed after a time.

“I can take care of myself,” said Megatron, and reached down with his free servo to stroke his erect spike. Optimus watched him for a while, imagining that length and girth inside him. It was a nice enough spike, dark gray and maroon. No barbs or thick knobs to drag over valve sensors, and nothing that looked like it could expand to tie him to his submissive partner. Just, a spike. A *very* large spike, slickening with lubricants.

He watched Megatron’s servo move, the way he squeezed a bit at the tip, and an idea came to him. He pushed himself up. “May I...” He wasn’t sure how to complete the sentence, but he very much wanted to give back. The idea of Megatron overloading under him was incredibly appealing.

Megatron nodded and moved his servo out of the way. Optimus climbed onto him, where he could reach Megatron’s spike properly, and was struck with a brief acute bout of nervousness—he’d only ever read about doing this sort of thing in the sort of books you hid under your berth padding during inspection, and those were dreadfully inaccurate when it came to military maneuvers even though most of the main characters were supposed to be Autobot officers, and who knew how much more accurate they were supposed to be about their actual subject matter? He hoped more so. He remembered something about flicking your glossa a certain way and about not actually biting and keeping your dentae covered with the edges of your intake so you didn’t scrape anything sensitive in the wrong way. He looked down at the spike in front of him and carefully wrapped a servo around it, started to move. The thin plating under his palm seemed almost soft, like organic satin, and he worried that if he pinched or squeezed wrong he might dent it.

It was slick with fluids. He wasn’t sure he wanted to put his intake on it. He rubbed his thumb over the tip of the spike, gently but firmly, and was rewarded by a sharply indrawn ventilation and a quiet groan. He repeated the gesture, and Megatron canted his hips up into his touch.

He watched Megatron’s faceplate, how his optics offlined and his intake opened to gasp in another

ventilation, cooling fans roaring, and that decided him. He leaned down and took as much of the spike as he could into his intake.

It wasn't very much. The taste wasn't as bad as he'd feared, though, just oily and metallic. He still wasn't sure about swallowing any of the lubricants, though. You were supposed to move your helm back and forth, right? And press a bit, that would make sense since Megatron seemed to like that...

A deep moan rumbled through Megatron's frame. Oh, good, he was doing *something* right.

He tried not to think about what exactly that something was, because this was utterly scandalous, but Megatron had been more than willing to bury his faceplate in a valve, so it really wasn't that bad, was it? This was between him and Megatron, no one else, and watching Megatron react was completely worth it.

Megatron's hips twitched, and kept twitching. Yes. Definitely something right. He had to back off a bit because that was making the spike bump the back of his intake and that was really uncomfortable, but Megatron stilled when he put his servos on his pelvic plating.

"Primus," said Megatron, "you're good."

He was? He had no clue of what he was doing, but that was encouraging. He also wasn't quite sure how much longer he could keep being good. His intake and glossa were getting tired.

Megatron shook under him, his servos fisting in the berth coverings, and his frame arched up, his vents coming in short sharp gasps. Then he froze, and hot liquid hit the back of Optimus's throat, making him sputter and jerk away.

Megatron subsided back on to the berth, panting. Optimus sat where he was, his intake full of transfluid, covered in cooling transfluid, and wondered where he could spit.

"I'm sorry," said Megatron. It sounded like he was laughing, or trying not to. "I wasn't expecting it or I would have warned you." He groped around and came up with a polishing cloth. Optimus spat into it with no small amount of gratitude. It wasn't that it tasted bad, but the prospect of *that* in his *tank* was *just too strange*.

Megatron produced a second cloth and started wiping him down, paused. He touched Optimus under the chin and kissed him. Optimus stiffened in surprise. His intake had just been around Megatron's spike, and Megatron was fine with kissing him?

"I'd never done that before," he admitted, when Megatron broke the kiss. Megatron chuckled and reached up to run the cloth over an audial fin.

"You're very good," he said, concentrating on wiping off Optimus's helm, even though Optimus was fairly sure there was nothing there. Then he looked down at himself, and started to wipe himself off as well.

Optimus smiled, feeling at once shy and content, and after a few more swipes, Megatron cast the cloth aside and gathered Optimus into his arms. "Thank you," he said again. "For being willing to try again after that fiasco. I am delighted by your company."

Optimus couldn't believe what he was hearing. "I should be thanking you," he said, a little shakily. It occurred to him that he ought to feel guilty, unnatural, about what he'd just done, but he was too tired and felt too good to think about it.

"No," said Megatron, burrowing his faceplate into the junction between Optimus's shoulder and

neck. “You don’t need to.” He turned his helm to nibble along Optimus’s neck. “You have always been one of the worthiest opponents I’ve ever fought. And now, we can face the universe together, as it should be, dearest spark.”

## Chapter 46

### Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Optimus online in hazy contentment. There was a large warm servo wrapped around his waist, and a warm, humming bulk at his back.

“Online?” said Megatron’s voice behind him, and he craned his helm back to look at the other mech. “Good. I was concerned I’d have to wake you for our duty shift.” The arm around him tightened, pulling him flush against Megatron’s plating, sending the vibrations of the other mech’s systems through his entire frame.

Optimus’s interface systems indicated that they were quite online and quite interested, and that he ought to be doing something about this.

“We should get moving,” said Megatron, sounding reluctant. “Washracks?”

“Certainly,” said Optimus, wormed his way out from under that big warm servo, and stood, realizing with a jolt of embarrassment that his array was still open. A glance over his shoulder showed that Megatron was in much the same state.

They entered the washracks together—fairly spacious washracks, and to Optimus’s surprise both of them fit. Megatron gave him a crooked smile and said, “The previous captain was rather larger than I.”

“I see,” said Optimus, looking around. The situation struck him all at once; he was standing in a Decepticon washracks, with his interface components open, and Lord Megatron standing in front of him and the night before they’d—they’d done something that was utterly indecent, that only pay-bots ought to. This wasn’t right, however much he wanted it, had the Decepticons corrupted his morality so completely?

Megatron turned on the washracks and warm water covered him, jolting him from his thoughts. He looked up at Megatron, who smiled again, leaned down and brushed a kiss over his helm. “It is a delight to have the company of a handsome, intelligent mech such as yourself once again,” he purred. He reached for the soap, covered a soft cloth, obviously organic in origin. “May I?”

It took Optimus a moment to realize what he was asking. “Oh!” he said aloud, and stepped out from under the spray. Megatron switched places with him and knelt to better reach him, running the cloth gently but firmly over his frame. Optimus leaned into the touch, feeling it wash away his anxiety. He glanced back at Megatron, and couldn’t look away at the intense, tender concentration on the other mech’s faceplate.

Megatron caught his optic and smiled again. “Turn around. I’m finished with your back.” Optimus obeyed, and Megatron went back to work.

One of Optimus’s fans clicked on. Megatron looked up at him, a thoughtful expression that turned into an absolutely wicked smirk. “May I?” he asked again—but this time his attention was on Optimus’s spike.

Curiosity and plain arousal overcame etiquette. Optimus nodded. And gasped, hard, when heat and pressure surrounded him. And—oh!—that had to be Megatron’s glossa, rubbing against his anterior node—Optimus clutched at the washracks wall and tried to stay upright.

In the end, it was only the message from Strika requesting their presence on the bridge that got them *out* of the washracks, and Optimus had firmly quashed the nagging voice in his processor that told him he ought to feel guilty. He wasn't quite sure how to feel about Megatron's open affection and respect, but guilt certainly wasn't it.

---

Oh, someone looked like a turbofox with the good oil. Strika wasn't sure how someone could look both smitten and smug, but Megatron managed it. Optimus just looked smitten. At least they'd cleaned off well enough not to stink up the place with ozone. She reset her vocalizer to get attention. "One of our informants just sent us this transmission," she said, and put it on the main viewscreen.

The vid was silent. People ran, things exploded, burst into flame. Elite Guard officers tried to calm the riots, but were overrun by obviously civilian frames—miners, but civilian all the same.

"This is a riot," she said. "Messantine. Our informant tells us that the Elite Guard was unsuccessful in quelling it."

On the screen, mecha stormed the administrative office. Someone climbed onto the roof and raised a flag. The video froze.

"They'll need assistance," said Optimus. "They beat the Elite Guard stationed there, certainly, but what will happen when the Guard arrives with a few Zeta Class dreadnoughts?"

"It is my judgement that we should send one of you and a detachment of ships to aid the riot and to claim the planet for the cause," said Strika. She touched another key to refine the image of the flag. The computer thought about it for a few moments, then changed the resolution. "My advice is that Lord Megatron ought to lead this expedition."

Silence fell across the room. After a few moments, Jazz said, "I get that feeling as well."

The rest of the Autobots kept staring at the image on the screen, the crudely-painted Decepticon sigil waving over an Autobot world, over cheering mecha with torn Autobot badges—or no badges at all.

"What did he *do*?" said Optimus aloud. "Some of them were Elite Guard! They've been trained to be horrified by Decepticons!"

"What did who do?" said Bumblebee.

"Sentinel," said Optimus, still staring at the screen, optics wide. "Whatever he did recently had to be bad, if Autobot miners are turning Decepticon."

"Messantine has a history," said Megatron. "But I, too, am startled. Should we not both go?"

"Only one of you is my advice," said Strika. "In case it's a trap."

Megatron and Optimus looked at each other, clearly unhappy. "Very well," said Megatron after a long moment.

---

A sol later found Megatron on Messantine. The rebels had enough of a structure that defense was easy; all they needed was the weaponry. And the ships.

Which didn't stop the Autobot general from being enormously stupid enough to try *boarding* the *Victory*. Megatron snarled and swung with both swords at the oncoming mecha, bulling Elite Guards

aside like toys. Someone had some kind of very strange energy weapon back there—if he didn't know better, he would say that someone had gotten hold of an energon harvester. At least one of his officers had already gone down choking under its onslaught, and he was going to rip the mech responsible to pieces once he got there. Only a matter of time.

The virulent pink beam swung back to him, and he blocked it with crossed swords, bracing himself against the onslaught. It would probably only hold it off for so long—

—and then he realized his swords were humming.

He looked at them, suspicious. They weren't supposed to do that. They were swords. You hit people with them, and if they hadn't gone blunt yet, bits came off. They were so simple that Lugnut with a hangover could use them—and had, on one memorable occasion when the Elite Guard had tried an uncharacteristic kidnapping—and they absolutely weren't supposed to do whatever they were currently doing.

The swords shifted in his servos, the right wrenching out of his grip and slamming into the left, and the utterly incongruous sound of a transformation sounded loud in the suddenly quiet hallway. Both Autobots and Decepticons had simply stopped, staring at Megatron's disobedient swords as they combined and transformed into something much, much larger.

He almost dropped it when it was finished; the weight was much greater than the two swords had ever been before. It settled into his palm, and the red stone in the center of the hilt glittered.

It wasn't supposed to do that, but he could have someone look it over afterwards. Right now, there was a battle to be had.

“Well,” he said, and smirked at the greatsword he now held, longer than he was tall, and took it in both servos in the proper manner, settling in a guard position he hadn't used in ages, “I suppose this will do.”

The Autobot line broke and scattered.

## Chapter End Notes

Greatswords--as humans use them--can be up to seven feet long. And actually exist. And are absolutely delightful to use. Especially when you're only a hair over five feet tall and have a lot to prove. The author may know this from experience.

## Chapter 47

### Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Optimus missed Megatron already, and it had been barely an Earth week. Fortunately, there was plenty to keep him busy.

In Megatron's absence, he was technically the local supreme commander of the alliance, Autobots and Decepticons both. And Decepticons could get up to slag far worse than even Bumblebee and Sari combined. Bumblebee and Sari were capable of remarkable (and, in retrospect, amusing) mayhem. The mayhem that certain elements of the Decepticons would cause if given a chance was anything but amusing; the results wouldn't be measured in monetary property damage, but in lives.

Witness the kill codes he now held.

Strika had given them to him. He'd tried to refuse, appalled by the concept, but she'd insisted.

Insisted probably being too gentle a word.

"They're for the Phase Sixers," she said. "Megazarak's old superweapons. You've already met one of them, Tarn. He's the loyalest of the lot, and the sanest." She let Optimus consider that, then added, "And the nicest. Overlord, Sixshot and Black Shadow, not nearly so much. You're probably used to thinking most everything you've been taught about Decepticons is grossly exaggerated. With these four, it's not. They're monsters, selected by Megazarak for their complete lack of conscience and then given enormous power. We don't know how much of their loyalty—if they have any—remains with Megazarak, and the only reason we haven't offlined the lot of them is Megatron's conscience, and because I don't want to give up the strategic advantage they represent. You will take those kill codes. And if they try anything—which they may well, with a new commander at the helm—you will use them. If you don't, we won't be the only ones who die. They'll go for the rest of the universe after they're done."

Optimus did remember what he'd learned about the Phase Sixers, and the idea that it wasn't exaggerated made his tanks clench.

"Keep a careful optic on Tarn and Overlord in particular," said Strika. "Tarn's a fanatic, and Overlord's a sadistic power-junkie who can't wait to get off over the next hundred disemboweled corpses he creates. And they hate each other." She handed him the download cable. "Have I made myself clear?"

She had. Optimus took the cable and downloaded the necessary information, and then tried to come to peace with the fact that he had the ability to murder four people instantly with a simple transmission.

He'd grown used to the Decepticons, and used to taking them for granted as slightly angrier Autobots. This was a dose of cold oil—and the other disciplinary issues he'd dealt with kept him from becoming complacent again. Fights happened all the time among the Decepticons, and there were incidents of groups of Decepticons trying to bully new Autobot recruits. Trying being the operative word; a very close optic was being kept on the offenders, and few of those incidents had been recent—the punishments visited upon the offenders had been enough to discourage repeats. He hadn't realized the *tensions* present within the Decepticon ranks that the alliance had created, and felt like an idiot for missing them—or had Megatron and Strika been hiding the extents they'd had to go

to?

The Decepticons, as a group, were like a very large, rambunctious, and potentially vicious animal, an animal that Optimus was trying to restrain with the aid of a bit of organic rope. He brought up the subject to Strika, who only seemed amused.

“Well, of course,” she said. “Many of us were programmed to do the Autobots’ dirty work, and to crave rigid discipline and structure. Some have defied this. Others haven’t, and are only glad they’re being led by one of theirs—and still others don’t care who’s leading as long as their daily lives don’t change and they can kill things. We all live with our manufacturing parameters in our own ways, there’s no dishonor in that. Don’t look for Primes among *our* ranks, Autobot.”

So now Optimus sat in the rec room on *Conquest*, and listened to two of those same Phase Sixers, Black Shadow and Sixshot, happily singing along with the increasingly explicit ballads someone was coaxing out of the ship’s aged entertainment systems. They were acting like Autobots, though the obscenities would probably have come to an abrupt halt if any Autobot had realized there was an officer in the room.

He sighed, tried to block out the strains of *The Prime’s Accommodating Batchmate* and that paragon of obscene ditties known the universe over as *The Good Ship Venus*, and went back to reading the most recent of Strika’s reports.

Strika herself and Ratchet were happily caroling along, and Optimus glanced up and frowned at Ratchet. He was disturbingly accurate—and even more disturbingly *gleeful*. It was certainly educational. Optimus hadn’t known that anyone would view cyber-eels *that* way.

The tune changed. Optimus let out a sigh of relief that turned into an inward groan. *Unicron and the Widow?* Really? Unicron wasn’t the sort of thing you sung...this sort of thing about! And it was impossible to not listen, something about it just...drew the audials.

“You were supposed to be here to relax,” Ratchet pointed out during one of the instrumental bits.

“I don’t know any of the words,” said Optimus, first thing he could think of.

“Oh,” said Ratchet, and handed him a datapad. “Here.”

Optimus read. He felt his audials begin to heat. “Primus!” he said aloud. “You’re joking.” Then, “*How* many of these are there?”

“Never underestimate the abilities of bored soldiers,” said Strika, then joined in the final couplet with a surprisingly melodious—and above all, *enthusiastic*—bass. Optimus had to grab for his cube before it vibrated its way off the table.

And then the battle stations klaxons went off.

“*Beat to quarters!*” Slipstream’s voice cut through the general uproar. “*Generals Optimus and Strika, to the bridge.*”

“Frag,” said Strika and lurched upright. Ratchet’s chair clattered to the ground—he was already out the door. “Come on. Let’s see what the fragging bots are up to this time.”

---

Megatron and a number of the miners’ elected leaders sat around the strategy table and looked at the sword in the center of it. All attempts to persuade it to separate back into its individual components had failed either miserably or hilariously—one had resulted in Megatron gaining a set of minor but



irritating singes on his armguards.

“No, I haven’t seen anything like it,” said the oldest of them, D-494. Megatron had initially dismissed her as an incompetent civilian, and been taken aback by her refusal to accept a proper designation, but D-494’s eccentricities were more than made up for by a vicious cleverness and an even more vicious sense of humor. Both together, applied to defense, had resulted in some impressive victories. In terms of both Autobot lives and morale.

“My serial number was supposed to make me less of a sentient being,” she’d said when Megatron demanded why she’d keep such a humiliating title. “By embracing it, and leading our people to freedom, I am proving that the very thing that the Autobots used to define me as lesser has no power over me. To change my designation would be to acknowledge their effort as successful, and show shame for the one name that has been mine since I was brought online.”

Megatron wasn’t sure how much the older bot’s evaluation counted for—for all her age, she’d spent most of it below ground—but it did make him feel less of a fool for being unaware of the swords’ capabilities. Or sword’s. He folded his arms. “I suppose I *can* use it, all the same,” he said. “It matters little; the Autobots are already all but defeated.”

“Messantine will be ours!” declared the younger of D-494’s lieutenants, Hardhitter. Megatron had also been inclined to dismiss him on the grounds of young idiocy, but the younger mech had proven to be a capable warrior. Megatron was tempted to take Hardhitter with him and suggest him to Strika as another possible protege. She did, after all, tend to collect them.

“Ill-behaved swords or no,” said D-494. She looked up as her other lieutenant, Tachyon, pushed his way into the structure, dragging two Autobots in stasis cuffs with him. He put them down on the floor, and they glared up at Megatron with identical expressions of defiant bravado.

Megatron looked down at them. They were larger than most Autobots, obviously flightframes, and garish blue and orange. All in all, recognizable. Not that he remembered their *designations*, but he’d seen them on Earth. Part of Optimus’s team, no less. What a delightful coincidence—the safe if involuntary return of two of the mecha formerly under his command would certainly be welcome.

“We captured them because Autobot flightframes—”

Megatron raised a servo. “No need to explain yourself,” he said. “I recognize them. Prepare them for immediate transport back to the Decepticon fleet; Optimus will likely want to see them.”

The orange mech’s optics went wide, but the mouth clamp kept him from saying anything. The glares, if anything, intensified.

“Now,” said Megatron, pleased with himself, and turned back to the immediate issue of freeing Messantine once the prisoners were out of hearing range, “our lines are thin *here*. Move this unit *here*, and replace them with my 14th division, they’re more experienced...”

---

“What happened?”

Slipstream gestured to the holotable. “Two Autobot squadrons incoming,” she said. “Bulkhead shut down the spacebridge, so we won’t have any coming through there. But there’s something wrong with their ships.”

“What do you mean?” Optimus leaned forward.

“We’ve never seen anything like them.”

“Like what?” They turned. Jazz pushed his way onto the bridge. “Look, I know I’m not exactly Decepticon of the Year, but I did just defect from Autobot Intelligence. What do those ships look like?”

Optimus reached into the holotable and after a few tries managed to persuade it to magnify the ship in question. “Oh,” said Jazz. “Those.”

“Those,” said Strika, looking at him sidelong. “That was not a good tone.”

“They’re not good news.” Jazz leaned in. “That’s the Elite Guard’s newest ship, the Ultra class dreadnoughts. They named it after old UM after he offlined.”

“He offlined?” It shouldn’t have startled Optimus so badly, and given the shape of the government Ultra Magnus had run, and the injustices under his administration, it shouldn’t have caused a sharp pang of grief. It did.

“Yup,” said Jazz. “Not even half an orn after you left. The armament consists of...”

Optimus listened to Jazz list the incoming ships’ stats with a rapidly sinking spark. Even *Conquest*, lovingly maintained as she was, stood very little chance in a direct battle with *one* of those. Their firepower was enormously superior—the flagship threw twice the energy in an average broadside than *Conquest*, and the engines had been completely overhauled, creating a much faster ship for the size-class.

“We’ll have to retreat,” said Strika. “Frag. After everything—we’ll retreat. Better to lose the system than our ability to fight.”

She was right. Optimus could tell she hated it. She sounded almost sick as she said it. It didn’t make her any less right. He looked into the table. There were four of those new ships, a huge spread of support ships—they were fragged if they engaged in a traditional battle. The Decepticon line wouldn’t last a megacycle.

Which meant they shouldn’t fight traditionally.

“If you didn’t form a line of battle and harried them with the frigates and support ships, how long could we hold them off?” he asked.

“A few megacycles,” said Strika. “We’d take heavy damage. Retreat would be difficult, and I don’t see a possibility of victory.”

“Jazz. Any manufacturing defects?”

“They’re more lightly armored than the old *Steelhaven*,” said Jazz. “They’re relying on the placement of the weapons systems to protect the engines—you see how they’re tucked up in the belly of the ship with the weapons banks on either side.”

Optimus did. The weapons banks with the engines in the center formed an inverted v seen from the aft of the ship, the engines tucked away at the apex of that v. Impossible to shoot with a traditional broadside. In fact, impossible to get at in almost any battle situation unless you could come up from underneath, and the placement of the engines were such that it might allow the ship to be flipped to present the weapons systems instead. “Is that all?”

“There’s no exhaust tube to put a torpedo down, if that’s what you’re hoping,” said Jazz. “Engines

are the most vulnerable part of the ship. Doesn't need armor, not with the protection of the weapons."

"Hm," said Optimus. "Good. Slipstream? I need six flyers you trust to be calm and quickwitted under fire. Smaller is better. Jazz, how do you feel about flying?"

"Oh no. Don't tell me Ratch whipped up another of those damned jetpacks."

"The Autobots are doing it. Bulkhead and Bumblebee even stole one."

"Fine," huffed Jazz.

"Strika, how's our store of explosives?"

"Large," said Strika, looking at him suspiciously. "What do you have in mind?"

"Something extremely inadvisable," said Optimus. His spark beat fast, and totally inappropriate to the situation, a wild excitement grew in him. This might work. He could *do* this! "The engines are weakly armored. Standard-issue Decepticon explosive charges punch through most standard Autobot ablative armor. Even that of the *Steelhaven*."

"Where do you want the team to meet you?" asked Slipstream.

"Aft launch bay. The sooner we can get away from the ship, the better. We don't want them to notice there are flyers out there."

"Take a shuttle," said Strika. "There are plenty of things that can splat you out there, Autobot. Even debris."

"They'll notice the shuttle. We need to make sure they don't know we're there. Strika, can you keep them occupied for long enough?"

"As long as you need," said Strika, "Or until they blow *Conquest* apart under my stabilizers."

Optimus smiled. "Let's hope it won't come to that."

"Seekers assembled, sir," said Slipstream. "I took the liberty of putting myself on that list."

"Very good," said Optimus. "Slipstream, Jazz, with me. Strika, have the explosives ready for us in the launch bay."

"And the jetpacks," said Strika. "Are you sure—"

"Yes," said Optimus. "Just keep them off our thrusters long enough to get the explosives placed."

She nodded, and Optimus strode off the bridge, feeling faintly ridiculous because he had to take two steps to Slipstream's one. At least Jazz was in the same situation.

"Teams of two," he told the assembled mecha. "Each of you will carry an explosive, in case your partner is deactivated before placing the bomb. Fix them at the apex of this," he gestured to the diagram of one of the ships. "That's the engines. Then get clear. The future of our cause rests on your shoulders. And don't get spotted; you'll be debris if you do."

They nodded solemnly, a motley group, tall elegant Seekers and little awkward Autobots with the bulk of jetpacks on their backs. Slipstream stood next to Smokescreen, the littler Decepticon shifting from stabilizer to stabilizer and all but bouncing with enthusiasm.

He was proud of all of them in that moment. Scared, because they could all be offlined in the next few moments, but proud, and glad to have them at his back. “All right, people. Time to roll out!” He paused, looked around at them, and the absurdity of that struck him. “Or fly.”

Slipstream grinned down at him. “Rise up works too.”

“Fine,” said Optimus. “*Time to rise up!*”

## Chapter End Notes

I may have written most of this chapter to The Phoenix by Fall Out Boy. In case you were looking for a soundtrack.

## Chapter 48

Vacuum never felt natural. There was no risk of icing, but the strut-deep ache of cold settled into Optimus's frame. The operation of his systems would keep his lines from freezing, but he hated the sensation all the same.

The other thing was the silence. It was almost unbearable; the audials began to generate false noise to compensate for it, buzzing and ringing. And even though he was flying at breakneck pace for the smaller ships of the fleet, there was no sensation of the movement of air.

Optimus hated vacuum. He didn't see how the Decepticon flyers tolerated it.

They'd hide among the smallships until the Elite Guard was distracted enough by Strika's defense. Then they'd advance, place the bombs, and get out. They were good bombs, too, force-fielded to direct the blast up into the belly of whatever they were attached to, carefully designed for use in space.

A ping reached his commsuite. Jazz.

*"So why'd you take me? Not that I'm complaining, mind, but I know my loyalty's still in doubt. Why trust me with your back?"*

Optimus thought about it, watching the rapidly approaching glitter of hard starlight on hulls.

*"Because I think you needed me to."*

Jazz looked at him sidelong, a deeply suspicious expression. Optimus shrugged. He felt like an idiot for saying that now, but he didn't have time to explain. If Jazz was telling the truth, if he regretted what he'd done to other Autobots in the name of order, he needed to see that he could be forgiven, that absolution, no matter the wrong, was possible. It was what Optimus would have needed in his place.

Slipstream and Smokescreen broke away, headed for the furthest ship—*Righteous Fury*, if the ID information Strika was sending him was correct. The other three groups peeled away, and left Jazz and Optimus looking at the *Magnus*.

Optimus dove forward. Above them, light flickered as *Conquest* began its attack, eerie and silent in vacuum.

Jazz whooped over comms. Well, at least the flying suited him. Optimus darted and ducked, trying to keep within the sensor footprints of the other ships as much as he could; they were small enough that they would blend in with the larger masses, making them hard to detect.

If Optimus had thought the description was bad, seeing *Magnus* this close was worse. He could spot all that top-of-the-line armament, and it wasn't encouraging. They were going to have to get around all that. Fortunately, most of it was aimed at *Conquest*.

Here was hoping that Strika could hold out. *"Let's do this,"* he sent, and threw himself forward. Now or never.

It was easier than expected. Locked in a silent fury, there was hardly opportunity for the two ships to notice the activities of two very small independently propelled objects. The engine sections loomed ahead of them; Optimus shot up and under, tucking himself into the crease of the hull, and streaked along it as close as he dared. He reached for the bomb, disconnected it, pulled up short, and fastened

it to the hull. Next to him, Jazz did the same with his explosive. “*Ready?*”

Jazz nodded, and Optimus kicked down and away from the ship. They had to get out of range as quickly as possible; the timer on those was deliberately short. One klick, two—

There was no sound of *whumph*. Sound doesn’t carry in vacuum. But the experience was *whumph*, especially as the explosives tore open *Magnus’s* belly. Atmosphere boiled out, freezing as it did, a great white cloud flickering orange. *Magnus* shuddered again, and Optimus could only imagine the chaos within, red-streaked smoke and shouts and screams over the roar of escaping atmosphere.

*Magnus* bucked. Another explosion tore the hull—and then something reached the central reactor of the engines, some shrapnel, fire, something, because there was a dreadful long silent moment, and then the ship blew apart. Bits shot away—and kept going, without friction. Some of those bits had been people. Optimus ducked them as best he could, pulled Jazz away from the sudden undadulturated blast of heat that would have slagged him right there without atmosphere to dissipate it, and fled back to *Conquest*.

Across the fleet, *Righteous Fury* went up as well.

Something sour settled in Optimus’s tank. *This was my idea*, he thought. *And I’ll have to live with it.*

“*Optimus!*” Smokescreen sent, sharp but not panicked. “*Slipstream’s injured. My jetpack can’t accelerate both of us out of range fast enough!*”

“*On our way,*” said Optimus, and threw himself back into the fray.

Slipstream was *furious*. One of her thrusters had been severed below the knee, by a flying chunk of berth, apparently, and the indignity of that was certainly not lost on her. The heat-burns across her other shin didn’t help matters at all. She was snarling curses into vacuum, optics blazing. Optimus was glad that she wasn’t transferring half the rant onto comms.

The next ship blew, and after a long attempted vent, the last went as well. *Conquest* bucked under the onslaught of the abruptly released heat energy.

“*Try ambushing us again, fraggers,*” said Slipstream, with vicious satisfaction.

And then they realized what they were in the shadow of.

Under any other circumstance, it would have been comical, the two Autobots and two Decepticons all looking up slowly with identical expressions of horrified disbelief, red and blue optics equally wide, all clustered together for support as if hugging each other in fear.

Four intakes formed the same curse, as they all met the optics of the enormous Autobot decal above their helms. Red as human blood, Optimus thought in a brief, absolute panic, then yanked his faceplate back under stern control. It didn’t do for your subordinates to see you with an expression of absolute panic. “*Time to go,*” he said, trying to sound calm, and they turned—

—and found themselves face to muzzle with a lot of Autobot blasters. Optimus cursed his incompetence; he’d fallen back on *listening* for approaching threats again, and no one had any idea of their approach until now. Frag. He glanced over his shoulder, in time to see a forward hatch open and disgorge more Autobots behind them. All had jetpacks, rapidly spread to guard them from below as well.

*Frag*, he thought. There was no way out of this.

The lead Autobot gestured for them to raise their servos. Optimus couldn't see a way out, but being captured would be worse. Not for him, but for Slipstream and Smokescreen and Jazz; Smokescreen would be dissected to see what had gone wrong with her, Slipstream would be subjected to the same kind of experiments that had crippled her brothers, and Jazz... Optimus didn't like to think of what would happen to Jazz.

So he settled into a defensive stance, and there was an almost palpable air of relief from the mecha around him. Slipstream shook herself loose from their support and leveled both blasters at their captors.

There was a moment of hesitation.

And then a purple wave of light slammed into the mecha in front of them, and silent chaos erupted around them. Optimus spotted Thundercracker and a few other members of his team, but there were bigger forms there, far bigger, and where they were, no bot survived very long at all. One slowed long enough to be recognized, and tank purge rose in the back of Optimus's intake. It was Tarn, the big Phase Sixer who'd tried to kill him when he'd first arrived. And there were others.

*Oh Primus, Strika set them all loose!*

They ripped the Autobots threatening the team apart. Then they started on the frigate itself, and there was no time to stop them. They simply worked too fast.

Optimus's intake half-opened in protest, and one detached himself from the rapidly growing wreck and met them. He lifted Slipstream and Smokescreen together in one massive energon-stained servo, a gentle grip that looked threatening all the same. *"General Strika informs me that you are to retreat immediately."* The generous intake with its wide dermas tipped up in a smile. *"I am to make sure you do."*

The smile made Optimus want to jump in the washracks and scrub half his paint off to get the memory off. Jumping in the effluent of a thousand malfunctioning oilpans would have been preferable to that smile.

*"Come along then, little Autobots,"* said the Phase-Sixer.

Slipstream glared at him, Smokescreen yelled, *"Next time you call me an Autobot is when you lose your fragging glossa, Overlord!"*

The universe seemed to freeze. Slipstream looked down at her companion with an expression of utter horror. Optimus was abruptly very glad indeed of the kill-codes.

But Overlord just laughed, infinitely condescending, and somehow that was worse.

*"Enough of that,"* said Optimus, forcing a snap into his voice. *"Come on. We've done our job."*

Overlord looked at him. He could have sworn he felt his paint try to crawl off his front to get away from that gaze. That smile remained, but the optics were all wrong, cold, like the mind behind them were absent...and then for a flash of a second, it was.

Optimus's intake went completely dry, because that split second of evaluation was the most terrifying thing he'd ever felt. There was a mind behind those optics, and he never wanted to encounter it again. *"Come on,"* he said again. *"We can support Slipstream. There is no need for you to carry her."*

Overlord complied. That was somehow worse than any challenge could be.

Optimus made sure to fly sweep. He didn't want to turn his back on Overlord. If he did and survived, he had a nasty feeling that it was because Overlord didn't feel like it was convenient to kill him at that moment.

Monsters indeed.

Behind them, the Autobot fleet broke ranks and fled.

---

"Urgent message for Lord Megatron," said one of D-494's messengers, tapping urgently at Megatron's arm. "From General Strika. Packaged, encrypted."

Megatron looked down at the little femme, an administrative model, one of the few that had joined D-494's rebellion. She bobbed her helm at him. "It's in Command. We won't risk transferring it. Tachyon will take over from you here, sir."

He nodded at her, transformed, and rumbled into the air. Messantine would fall soon, and he intended to appoint D-494 as his governor and take Hardhitter with him. The latter wasn't entirely altruistic; letting the younger bot learn more of command would be good for him, but it also meant that they'd have a hostage to make sure that, if D-494 got any ideas about betrayal or breaking their alliance, she'd have good reason to rethink them.

He transformed as he landed, straightening from his crouch to meet D-494's optics. "There is a message?"

"Yes," said D-494. "And a report. The Autobots are retreating, abandoning the planet. We have *won*."

He clapped her on the shoulder, pleased that he could do so with force and not damage her, and strode past her into Command.

He opened the message. His intake parted, just a little. He drew in a long ventilation.

Lord Megatron had fought in thousands of battles, suffered thousands of setbacks, won countless victories. He had four million years of practice in the proper restraint of command, the proper restraint that didn't involve shouting curses in the midst of battle when something went poorly. It made you look juvenile, and could break the morale of your troops, he knew. And the last time he'd come even close—but not crossed the line into actual cursing, only into shouting—had been on Earth when he watched his Cause crumble into dust in his very servos, and knowing the Autobots there intended to deliver him to a fate far worse than deactivation.

Lord Megatron drew in that long ventilation and let it out in a roar of profanity, in which the words *HE DID WHAT?!* were somewhat discernible.

Then, while the staffers clustered around him, babbling like distressed juvenile Earth birds, and D-494 stared at him with cool shock, he started laughing, harder than he had in a very long time. Helm thrown back, servo over faceplate, so hard it was difficult to draw in a good ventilation, he laughed, amused, impressed, admiring and delighted all at once.



## Chapter 49

Having Slipstream as a patient was just as bad as having Strika. She tried to get up and move about as soon as the stabilizer was repaired, and Ratchet had to call Strika to get her to behave. The transmission that came in from Windblade a bit after the battle helped some; apparently Caminus was receiving bulletins on the war, and Slipstream's role in the recent battle—and her injury—had reached the former colony. Windblade had taken the time to send a transmission wishing Slipstream well, and when she realized what it was, her wings had gone bolt upright, quivering with delight, and she'd made a high-pitched noise that no Decepticon would usually admit to. If Ratchet recalled his conversations with Sari correctly, it was called a *squee*.

The number of transmissions between Caminus and *Conqueror* increased drastically after that.

Omega and Arcee arrived before Megatron did, which was one small mercy for which Ratchet was grateful, and Shockwave was off in an intelligence briefing with Strika and Optimus, which was another.

So they had the medical bay to themselves.

"It's not much," said Ratchet, nervously, pulling out a seat for her. She gave him a look of cool amusement as she settled into it, and they both sat and looked at each other a while.

"I didn't have a choice," he said softly.

"Everyone has a choice," she said, just as softly. Ratchet winced. It would have been better if she'd yelled.

"They were going to lobotomize Optimus. And the Decepticons. I couldn't stand by and let that happen."

"So you defected."

"So I defected," said Ratchet. "It was the simplest solution."

"Even after everything that happened in the war."

"Yes."

They stared at each other again. It was an effort to meet her optics, but Ratchet forced himself to.

"You are not the mech I thought you were," she said.

"I know," said Ratchet. It hurt to hear. He offlined his optics and ducked his helm.

"You'd turn to the Decepticons after everything Lockdown did? And Shockwave? And what Megatron did to Omega?"

"I'm sorry," said Ratchet. "Arcee, I didn't do it lightly, I did it because they'd taken my research that I wanted to use to help other people with processor injuries, and used it to lobotomize people. What they did to Lugnut was butchery, sheer bloody butchery, on a *prisoner*, Arcee. They changed who he was. They changed what he was. That's bad enough as an effect of a wound in battle, but done deliberately? Primus, Arcee, I couldn't let that happen, and then there was what Sentinel was doing to Optimus." He looked down at his servos. "They dragged me into it and wanted me to be

complicit. And when I entered the operating room, they had Optimus on the slab. So tell me, Arcee, what the frag was I *supposed to do*?” He looked up at her, suddenly very angry. She looked back at him coolly.

“We correct the cause,” she said softly. “Not abandon it.”

“Well I—” Ratchet cut himself off and looked away. “I’m not strong enough to do that, then,” he said. “Maybe some mecha are, and I hope to Primus that they get to work, because good mecha are dying at its hands.”

She just looked at him.

Ratchet put his faceplate in his servos. He remembered Lockdown, remembered Shockwave, remembered the horror of what Shockwave and Megatron had done to Arcee and Omega, both of whom he felt responsible to...

He forced his helm up. “I don’t think I could have done anything else,” he said, “and been myself. Either you can accept that, or you can’t. I’m sorry, but I couldn’t let them use me to do,” he gestured in the direction of the ward that contained the injured Seekers, “that. Primus, Arcee, why did you even come?”

She put a small object down on the table in front of him. Human made, gleaming, a thick stylus with long pipes rising from the back. “Sumdac sent that. He also expressed his concerns about Optimus.”

“The kid is fine. Slag, the kid’s more than fine. The kid took on an entire fragging *fleet*, and even better, he won.”

“And where Megatron’s involved?”

“I’m keeping an optic on it.”

“Good,” she said.

Silence again.

“I understand if you leave,” he said. “And don’t want to see me again.”

“Don’t be so dramatic,” she said. “But you owe an explanation to Omega.”

“Yeah, I sure do,” said Ratchet. “And what about you?”

“I don’t like it,” she said. “But I hear Megatron has a bounty on Lockdown’s helm, which helps, and I think Optimus is competent, for all his faults, and I don’t want to see your research misused, either.”

“So...”

“I’ll join the AFF,” she said. “But don’t expect me to be friendly with any Decepticons, and if I see Shockwave or Megatron, I’ll be kicking them.”

“Sounds fair,” said Ratchet, hugely relieved.

“What they did to me was unforgivable,” Arcee said flatly. “But the Autobots are doing worse, on a much larger scale. I’d be a hypocrite of the worst order if I supported them merely because of what Shockwave and Megatron did.”

“Thank you,” said Ratchet.

She snorted. “But Omega hasn’t made up his mind yet,” she said. “And you’d better talk to him. I’m not going to tell him what he’s supposed to think; he’s had enough of that.”

Ratchet put his faceplate in his servo and let out a small, sparkfelt groan.

“It was your decision,” said Arcee. “If you can’t explain it to Omega, you shouldn’t have made it. You’re his mentor, Ratchet. I’m only a substitute, and he misses you.”

“Mentor?” said Ratchet. “He was programmed to rely on me, believe anything I said. That’s not a mentorship, that’s damn near slavery.”

“You still need to talk to him,” said Arcee flatly.

---

She was right, of course. It didn’t make walking into the secondary aft shuttlebay, hastily refitted into something like a hab-suite (Shockwave assured Ratchet that Decepticons had counted shuttles among their ranks back before the war, though none so heavily armed or armored as Omega, and were familiar with making appropriate accommodations) any easier. It didn’t make resetting his vocalizer and saying, “Omega?” any easier either.

Omega looked down at him. It was a bit of a shock to see him in root mode—he’d always preferred his alt during the war, because it meant Autobots wouldn’t stare at him. “Hello, Ratchet,” he said.

“You doing okay?” said Ratchet.

“Yes. They are very kind. Even if they are Decepticons.” Omega’s optics narrowed. “You told me that I was supposed to protect Autobots. Now Arcee says you are protecting Decepticons. I do not understand.”

“Not just Decepticons,” said Ratchet. “Autobots too. And you.”

Omega frowned. “I do not need to be protected.”

Ratchet looked up at him, lost for words. How did you tell someone that he’d been created as a tool, all the myriad ways his very processor had been compromised to ensure he’d never rebel? How did you tell him that his trust in you only existed so you could manipulate him into committing unspeakable atrocities without asking questions, and that you were supposed to kill him if he didn’t?

All the difficulty of explaining this aside, Ratchet had never felt more sure of his decision to defect.

He could of course simply say that Sentinel and his faction were killing other Autobots, and that these Autobots needed protection, and then Omega’s programming would make him instantly ally with Optimus. But that wouldn’t be right. That would be manipulating him again, just like during the last war. That wasn’t what the new Cybertron should be about.

Ratchet sighed and sat on the floor. After a moment, Omega copied him.

“I want you to decide this for yourself,” said Ratchet. “It’s your choice, Omega. Both sides have Autobots on them. One is led by Sentinel.” *Remember, the one who tried to shoot you out of the sky?* “The other is led by Optimus.”

Omega looked at him, calm and interested.

“The reason I asked you to leave with Arcee was that Sentinel’s faction wanted you to be turned over to the Military Research Division,” said Ratchet. They said you were too big, and taking up too

much fuel, and too dangerous.”

“I would never hurt an Autobot.”

Ratchet looked up at him sadly. “I know, old friend.”

“And I do not like the Military Research Division.”

That, Ratchet was all too familiar with. Omega’s medical checkups had been handled through MRD, because Perceptor and the others liked to keep an optic on how their creation was doing. Omega had hated them. Ratchet had to spend megacycles explaining to him why it was necessary each time, and persuading him that all the pinching and prodding would only last a little time and be over soon. It always made him feel like a traitor when Omega obeyed. Omega always obeyed. It wasn’t like he had a choice.

“They wanted to send Sari to MRD as well,” said Ratchet. Omega’s optics went wide. “We didn’t want to let that happen, to either of you, and so we sent you away with Arcee.”

“So you weren’t angry with us?” said Omega, and Ratchet’s spark broke at the way he said it.

“Never with you,” he said. “I wanted to keep you safe.”

“Because MRD wanted me.” When Ratchet nodded, Omega settled back. “And you joined the Decepticons to keep away from MRD?”

“They took Optimus,” said Ratchet.

“Why would they take Optimus? He isn’t glitched.” Omega looked away.

Ratchet’s tanks clenched at that. “Did someone tell you you were glitched?”

“Yes. The other medic.”

Probably Pharma. Frag him. Seeing him pounded into a cube of slag by enraged Decepticons was certainly not enough. “You’re not glitched,” said Ratchet. “You’re perfect the way you are.”

“Why did they take Optimus?” said Omega again.

“He made Sentinel angry,” said Ratchet. “They thought he was a Decepticon. And the only way to rescue him was to ask the Decepticons for help.”

Omega nodded.

“MRD had hurt a lot of people,” said Ratchet. “I couldn’t let that happen to Optimus, too.”

“MRD is hurting Autobots?”

“And Decepticons. Decepticons who couldn’t defend themselves.”

“I defend Autobots,” said Omega. Frag, the programming had kicked in again. Frag frag *frag*, couldn’t they have left the poor bot the dignity of a simple *choice*? But of course they hadn’t.

“Yes, but both sides are Autobots. Optimus and I are working with Megatron and the Decepticons to stop MRD and Sentinel. But MRD and Sentinel are still Autobots.”

“MRD and Sentinel are hurting Autobots. They are not Autobots. I will help you,” said Omega.

Ratchet sighed. Frag that programming. One day, he'd find a way to excise it. He didn't want to drag Omega into this fight when he was obviously only doing it because of that programming. He didn't mean to manipulate it, but apparently he had anyway.

"What Megatron did to you is wrong," said Ratchet. "You don't have to join us if you don't want to."

"I protect Autobots," said Omega. "That's what's important. I won't stop protecting Autobots because I'm angry at Megatron. And I'm staying with you, Ratchet."

Ratchet smiled up at him, even though it felt as if he'd manipulated Omega into doing this, despite all his efforts not to. "Thank you," he said. "So what did you and Arcee do while you were gone?"

---

He listened to Omega talk about the trip, and left feeling somewhat happier with the universe in general. It sounded as if the three of them had had a delightful adventure, well away from harm, and he wondered if he ought to tell them to leave again. But Omega was so eager to see Bumblebee and Bulkhead and Optimus again that he couldn't bear to bring it up. He didn't want to make Omega feel abandoned again.

It was in a thoughtful frame of processor that he left the medbay and headed back to his quarters. He hated the idea of throwing Omega into another war, after all they'd had to do in the last one. And he wanted to give Omega as much autonomy and ability to choose as possible. He was worried that the programming would take that away anyway.

He let out another heavy ventilation. There wasn't a good solution, and his processor wandered fretfully to another subject that had troubled him of late.

Strika had been avoiding him.

For all their open communication and Strika's obvious interest, things had...not progressed. Frankly, Ratchet was surprised at himself for not seeing that one coming, given Strika's recent loss and her personality.

Some mecha appeared to move on very rapidly from a personal loss, and take decisive action to 'prove' that they had—despite the fact that they hadn't, no matter how hard they tried to ignore it. And as the humans said, *what doesn't go out the door goes out the window*.

In other words, you could shove grief away all you wanted, it'd just find more destructive ways to express itself.

Ratchet was strongly suspicious that this was what was happening to Strika. She'd likely even been trying to force herself further along the path to recovery, in the belief that it would make her a more effective commander, and it was all too likely that her interest in Ratchet stemmed from that, rather than any real affection past friendship. *That* hurt, but he was a slagged fool for not considering it as a possibility. Of course only Strika really knew that for sure, and it didn't do to leap to conclusions, but Ratchet retained his suspicion all the same.

And yeah, it hurt to consider after she'd said she was interested that she hadn't been, but this slag *happened*. There were worse things to do than break understandings under these circumstances. Like hold people to them.

Another heavy sigh. That was becoming a habit. He dragged a servo over his faceplate. At least Optimus was doing well on his own. Ratchet hadn't dared ask about the relationship yet, but Optimus's time in command of the Decepticon fleet had been fairly impressive, and the kid had

seemed lighter-sparked of recent. If he could avoid having to sit down and have an interface talk with Optimus as well, he'd be a happy mech. At least Slipstream had already had something of an idea of the subject before he'd sat down to talk to her, and at least it wasn't urgent, with her paramour so far away.

*WHUMP.*

Ratchet startled at the sudden noise, badly enough his sirens tried to go on. He relaxed when he realized where he was, outside the practice room. One of the Decepticons, most likely. It was late, though. Most of the sensible ones should have been in berth, and the nocturnal ones should have been on duty. He went to investigate.

The doors slid open just as the occupant of the practice room hurled a weighted dummy her own size across the room, and resume attacking another.

Strika at work was spectacular, even if the only things to suffer were the practice dummies. He leaned against the doorframe. "You're making one Pit of a racket."

Strika didn't even pause.

"This or myself, medic," she snarled. "I cannot recharge. I lie awake in a too-big berth with only the company of my thoughts. I do not want the company of my thoughts. I do not want the silence in my spark. Don't you dare tell Megatron." Another hard blow. "He'll fret. It's undignified. He's already fretting enough over the little Prime."

"You will fall into recharge when you need it," said Ratchet. "Keep putting it off and that will happen at the worst moment possible. Have you considered the use of a recharge aid?"

He was somewhat surprised her servo didn't go right through the dummy. "No. Those are for medical use. Not to gentle my—" and the word was said with great disgust, "grief."

"That's a medical purpose," said Ratchet. "Shocking, I know. But this is an injury, in a medical sense. There is quantifiable damage to your spark, which is playing merry hell with your autonomic systems. It'll take time to resynch, and so care to make sure you're more comfortable is entirely appropriate."

She glared at him. He folded his servos. "Stop that. I get that look from all my patients. It doesn't work. Come on. Sleep aids and a big hot cube of lowgrade oil, that sound appealing?"

Strika looked at the bag, at him. "I suppose."

"And..." He looked down. "I don't want to make assumptions," he said. "If you need a friend more than a frag buddy, I'm here. If you want to go further than that, I'm also happy with that."

She just looked at him, then away.

"And if you don't know, that's fine too," he said.

"Don't coddle me," she said. "Where's this big hot cube of oil?"

Neither of them said anything further on the subject.

---

Optimus's spark beat fast as he watched the shuttle with Megatron and the rest of the supplemental forces sent to Messantine arrive. As soon as it landed and powered down, he strode forward. The

door opened in a hiss of hydraulics, and Megatron strode down the ramp, fading singes on his armguards and an enormous sword slung across his back.

Optimus went to him. Megatron grinned, caught him around the waist and Optimus repressed an undignified squeak as it knocked him off balance. Megatron caught him before he could fall, one servo on the small of his back, one cradling his helm, and kissed him. Hard. Lots of dentae. Optimus found himself kissing back before he realized what he was doing—or more precisely, what he was doing *in public*. In public, *in front of his subordinates*.

The Decepticons exploded into catcalls and cheers. The Autobots were fairly silent, though he heard Ratchet whoop.

“Optimus won us a great victory,” said Megatron, once he broke the kiss and placed Optimus back on his stabilizers. “Truly, he is worthy of praise and his role as a commander of this alliance, my equal.”

There was a hiss of indrawn ventilations through the room. Optimus's plating prickled uncomfortably at all those optics on him. The Decepticons seemed impressed, at least, but the Autobots were, to a mech, startled and even disapproving. He caught Jazz's optic, and winced at the expression on the other mech's faceplate.

But the Decepticons... Some of the older ones had expressions of open joy. He saw respect in the younger faceplates.

Clearly, there was something else going on here. He looked up at Megatron, who simply grinned and offered him an arm. “Now, I would prefer to hear this tale from you, in person.”

Snickering from the Decepticons. Oh no. What had they assumed that meant?

*“It's all right,”* sent Megatron on comms. *“I'll explain in private.”*

## Chapter 50

### Chapter Notes

Primus, this chapter turned into total smut with no plot. Guess they were glad to see each other?

(A happy, possibly belated, birthday to MizzArcee19! Hope I got it up on time!)

The doors to Megatron's quarters whooshed shut behind them and Optimus turned. It was an effort to speak; he worried he was being too presumptive, not appreciative enough. They'd been apart, after all. But Jazz's expression made it necessary. "What did you do that for?"

Megatron looked down with a wry twist to his mouth. "My apologies," he said. "I should have warned you. It was a political gesture to the Decepticons. I hope I have not caused you too much difficulty for the Autobots."

"You may have." The words were out before he could stop them. He should have. Megatron had just apologized, hadn't he?

"What may I do to remedy it?" Megatron caught his expression, and that wry smile grew. "You don't have to respond immediately."

"I..." Megatron was being far more tolerant than he had any reason to be.

"And I was glad to see you," Megatron added. "Very glad—you smashed the Autobot fleet in one battle, a battle even *Strika* had been certain we would lose!" He placed a servo on Optimus's shoulder and grinned down at him. "You are one of the most brilliant tacticians our species has ever produced. No wonder we lost on Earth!"

Optimus looked away, unsettled. Most of Earth had been desperate, spur of the moment invention. And if he was so brilliant, Prowl should still be online.

"I am deeply impressed," said Megatron, more quietly. "Though, please, next time you do something like this, be more careful. We cannot afford to lose you."

Optimus allowed himself to be gathered in close to Megatron's frame, and Megatron dropped a kiss on the top of his helm. A huge servo stroked up and down his back.

He couldn't bear this praise a moment longer. It felt as if he were lying by omission. "I'm not that good of a tactician," he said. "If I were, I wouldn't have lost one of my team on Earth."

"The cyberninja?" asked Megatron, and Optimus nodded against his chestplates.

"Even the best commander cannot keep everyone online," said Megatron. "A stray shot, bad luck, or their own choices—sometimes your subordinates still die." He paused. Optimus wondered if he was thinking about Lugnut. "Sometimes, you shouldn't do anything to stop it. Sometimes it's necessary."

Elita. Prowl. Optimus's mind flinched from that thought. It was one thing for Megatron to say that. Armies were different. When it was you and a small team, there were no excuses. He should have



offline, not Prowl. "It shouldn't be," he said softly. "I'll never abandon anyone again. Never."

Megatron remained silent. The servo kept moving over his back.

"You are still a brilliant tactician," he said after a long time. He kissed Optimus again. "No matter your history. We all make mistakes. I've lost my battles, and my people, too. Why do you think we are as ruthless as we are? It's what it means to be Decepticon. Your people face death and they're grim, mourn their dead. We laugh at it, we taunt it, and we cheer our dead. You have to, after so many losses. It's that or give up and be slaves." He paused. "Perhaps you, too, will learn that."

Optimus didn't want to believe that, but remained silent.

"I am glad to see you," said Megatron. He leaned back and kissed Optimus on the intake. Optimus leaned into it, glad to be back on familiar ground. He used that relief to push the other thoughts out of his processor, wrapped his arms around Megatron's neck. Megatron lifted him and held him. It made him feel better, so very much better, took his mind off the question of command.

"I want to do this properly," said Optimus, when they broke the kiss. His fans were already roaring, his valve lubricating, and he could hear Megatron's fans as well. The heat of Megatron's chassis between his legs only increased it. When Megatron looked blank, he managed, "Your spike in my valve," in a whisper. It was difficult to say, but the rev of Megatron's engine and the way that Megatron's vocalizer clicked as he reset it twice in rapid succession was encouraging.

"Design specifications?" Megatron asked, voice still fizzed with static, reset his vocalizer again, and said, "That is to say, what are your design specifications? I want to make sure I'm within your parameters."

Optimus felt himself flush even hotter, but related the exact model of his valve and dimensions with only a slight stammer, and Megatron looked thoughtful, then relieved. "*Good*," he said, and kissed Optimus hard, lifting him and placing him on the berth. Optimus let out a breathy moan as Megatron parted his legs and placed a hand over his bared valve. A digit dipped in and rubbed his anterior node. Optimus's hips twitched into it.

"I thought you said we were compatible," he managed. Megatron smiled down at him, leaning over him with one servo on the berth next to his helm and the other rubbing over his valve.

"I'm making you ready for me," he purred, and leaned down to kiss Optimus hard. Optimus moaned, and pressed himself hard against the digits playing with him, a huge rush of heat going to his array. Oh, this was good, and the idea of Megatron making him ready was slugging *hot*.

A digit probed at the entrance of his valve, and he spread his legs and cocked his hips to better accommodate it, then tensed with a gasp at a sharp pain.

Megatron froze. "What's wrong?"

"I'm not sure," he stammered, too embarrassed for anything else. "It's... I... It hurt, a little."

Megatron withdrew and favored the offending digit with a very irritated expression. "I rushed you," he said. "One moment." Optimus nodded, and Megatron went to a storage cubby in the bulkhead and rummaged in it for a few moments, then returned, something silvery in his servos. "If you're interested, we might try this."

Optimus peered down over his windshields at the the object Megatron held between two fingers. "What is that?"

“A vibrator,” said Megatron.

Oh. So Decepticons did use things like that for self service. Optimus had thought them a figment of the propaganda bots’ imaginations. “It’s not very big.” Megatron had a little mischievous smirk again, and that spelled trouble. The good kind. Optimus’s valve fluttered.

“It doesn’t need to be.” Megatron touched a switch, and the thing hummed in his servo. Optimus opened his legs to better accommodate him. Megatron reached for him, spreading his external folds with surprisingly delicate claws. His optics flicked up to meet Optimus’s. Optimus gasped as it touched his anterior node, tension furling instantly in the bottom of his tanks. His servos fisted in the berth covering.

“Oh good,” said Megatron. “You like that.”

Optimus would have said something along the lines of *of course I like that you slagger!* but forming words was too much trouble. He twitched his hips, trying to get more, and Megatron chuckled. A digit pressed slowly into him, and he braced himself for a pain. It didn’t come. Megatron kept the movements of it shallow, just in and out, and the stretch and the vibrator together felt good, incredibly good. He offlined his optics and lost himself in the pleasure.

The tension in the bottom of his tank built. Optimus opened his intake and panted as something rubbed against his ceiling node. It wasn’t uncomfortable at all, just *good*. He tried to squirm, not sure if it was to get more or less of that sensation. It was so much, almost too much, so so much, *oh Primus!* He hardly felt the girth of Megatron’s finger, vented in surprise as something stretched him.

“That’s two,” said Megatron, a pleased deep rumble. The pressure of the vibrator lightened, which somehow only made things worse. Every light touch as it bumped against his node sent a bolt of pleasure through him, so intense as to nearly border on pain. The fingers moved in him, and he bucked to reciprocate. They both crooked.

He let out a thin noise and stilled. “Very good,” said Megatron, and the vibrator clamped hard over his node, and he started to shake with overload.

There it was, all at once, a crushing pleasure that arched his back, robbed the ventilators of atmosphere, the processor of thought. His spike jetted transfluid, and it went on, and on, and on, so long that thought began to return while his frame still shook, and he started to vent under his own control again. It went on so long that he almost asked Megatron to move the vibrator away, it was too much, far too much, no frame could tolerate this for so long.

Then it was over. He looked into Megatron’s optics, panting. The vibrator hummed, the tension beginning, far more slowly, to build again. The two fingers in him felt like nothing at all.

Slowly, Megatron withdrew, and when he pushed in again, there was a faint sting. “Three,” he said.

Optimus grinned back at him, exhausted and elated both. “Your spike...”

“Become accustomed to this first,” said Megatron, and pressed a kiss to his knee, “and we will see about my spike.”

“Can that be used on your spike?” Optimus asked, greatly daring.

“There’s no reason not to try it,” said Megatron. “Once we’re finished here. We have a long night cycle ahead of us.” He kissed Optimus again, on the inside of his thigh, as far as he could reach with his hands so occupied.

Optimus felt the lines and cables of his back tense again, trembling, and the second overload swept through him. He let out a staticky cry, hoped distantly it wasn't too loud. Megatron laughed, and the digits in him pressed deeper, then withdrew.

Optimus came back to himself, shaking and weak. His entire frame felt heavy. Megatron caressed his hips, murmuring praise, then met his optics and asked, "Do you wish to continue?"

Optimus's optics fixed on the length of Megatron's spike, and his interface systems twitched in tired arousal. He nodded. "Yes," he said. "I'm fine." It was mostly static.

Megatron's grip tightened, and he lifted Optimus and resettled himself. Hard heat nudged at Optimus's valve, withdrew, rocked forward again, deeper. Optimus's hands fisted in the berth coverings, and he threw his helm back, pushing back, spreading himself further.

He'd expected it to be uncomfortable and only faintly arousing. It was incredible. The pleasure shot through his frame with every movement Megatron made.

"There," said Megatron, sounding satisfied, and stopped moving. Optimus whined. "That's all of me."

"Primus," whispered Optimus. It turned into a shout as Megatron withdrew and thrust, the pleasure and charge sending static across his vision.

"Wrong name," purred Megatron into his audial, and thrust again. Optimus bit his derma to try and stop the next scream. He didn't want the whole deck knowing!

He succeeded on that thrust. Not the next one. Not the one after it, and by the fourth, he gave up on keeping quiet. It was good, it was so good, it was *unimaginably* good. He'd always thought he wouldn't ever enjoy interface, made an exception for what Megatron did with him because it wasn't *real* interface, not spike in valve real interface. But this was good, this was as good as the other things they'd done, no, *better* because he wasn't scared of it anymore, and it really meant something.

Megatron was still talking, compliments, admiration. Optimus onlined his optics and looked up at him.

"You're beautiful," Megatron said. "Beautiful, strong. My most beloved warrior." He lifted Optimus's hips and doubled his pace. Optimus screamed and gasped and completely forgot about anyone who might hear them, lost himself in it, movement, electric pleasure, the scent of fuel and ozone and everything—

The world came apart. He shook with it, back bowed, intake open, no processor even to make a sound, and Megatron was still moving in him, drawing it out impossibly. Primus, Primus, this was too much, how did mecha do this, it was something like pain now, with the pleasure but he didn't want it to stop.

Above him, Megatron ventilated sharply, almost a cry, and went still. Heat rushed into his valve, and for the first time it didn't make Optimus feel filthy.

Megatron turned his helm and kissed the side of his faceplate. Megatron's spike slid out of him, making him whimper at the stimulation. He was exhausted, and his valve oversensitive.

Megatron worked his way down Optimus's frame, kissing and nibbling, stroking Optimus's plating as he went. "You are lovely," he said after a few moments. "The greatest commander the Autobots have ever produced." Another kiss. "Attractive, clever... it is so rare to find a mech *worthy* of my attentions, and yet you are so very worthy."

That sounded unnecessary arrogant on Megatron's part, but what he was doing felt so good, and Optimus was so tired, that he pushed the thought away as uncharitable. Megatron chuckled and turned his helm to kiss the tip of a stabilizer. "Do you wish to continue, or are you too exhausted?"

"Exhausted," Optimus said, and Megatron chuckled.

"Little wonder," he said. "Would you like to clean up?"

Optimus nodded. Megatron slipped an arm under his knees and another under his shoulders and carried him to the washracks. He stood, rather unsteadily, as Megatron turned the washracks on and scrubbed him with gentle servos. After a few moments he was recovered enough to return the favor.

After that, Megatron curled up around him in berth, and he dropped into an exhausted, happy recharge, with Megatron stroking his plating.

## Chapter 51

“I’m going to need an explanation.”

“What Jazz means is what the *FRAG* was that?” Arcee gestured vehemently in the general direction of the shuttlebay.

Ratchet put his faceplate in his servos and groaned. It had been bad enough acting as Optimus’s SIC after Optimus’s injury; right now was infinitely worse. He wished somebody, anybody, else would take the job. He was a doctor, not a politician!

Next to him, Strika reset her vocalizer and shifted her mass, probably so she could loom better. “That was,” she said deliberately, “Lord Megatron demonstrating that he wished to pursue a formal courtship for the first time since his sparkbonded mate died three million stellar cycles ago.”

“Is that why we’ve got drunk Decepticons everywhere?” Jazz asked, still deceptively calm.

“Indeed,” said Strika. “We hope that our leader will be happy again. After his sparkbreak over Terminus’s murder, we feel it has been too long. The Decepticons love Lord Megatron dearly. Why do you think he has lasted so long in command? We risk our sparks for him; why shouldn’t we be glad that he’s finally found someone who makes his spark sing?”

“And what about Optimus? Is he consenting?” Jazz looked sharply at Ratchet. “Or is this Sentinel all over again?”

“Sentinel?” said Strika, and also looked at Ratchet. Arcee’s expression was one of dawning comprehension.

Ratchet let out another sparkfelt groan. “Is medical confidentiality just a collection of syllables to you lot? Ever considered Optimus’s privacy, Jazz?”

“When it comes to leaders, privacy has to take a backseat,” said Jazz. “For everyone’s safety, the command staff need to know the weaknesses of the commanders. We’re not on Earth anymore, Ratchet.”

“Optimus crawled out of Pit twice over,” snarled Ratchet, and all three of them started in surprise. “*Leave it, Jazz.*”

“Megatron has no intentions on Optimus that Optimus will not wholesparkedly and enthusiastically consent to.” Strika’s voice was quiet, but a warning. “Next question?”

Uproar outside of the CMO’s office, Shockwave’s voice raised in protest, and the door erupted inward under a shove from Bulkhead, Bumblebee bouncing erratically at his stabilizers. Shockwave was visible behind and above Bulkhead, whatever he was saying drowned out by, “Ratchet, what’s going on with boss-bot?” and “Are Megatron and Optimus fragging?”

“Can we not be having this conversation?” muttered Ratchet into his servos.

“I’m sorry, General, Doctor,” said Shockwave behind the two. “Amublom and I attempted to keep them out. It did not work.”

“We need some *answers*, doc-bot!”

Ratchet sighed again. "Fine. That was Megatron publicly announcing his intention to court Optimus."

"That's an awful abrupt announcement," said Bulkhead. "Did Optimus know?"

"Ya know, before Megs swept him of his stabilizers?"

"Yes," said Ratchet and Strika together.

"Optimus and Megatron have been mutually interested for some time," said Strika. "Even if the timing of the exact announcement weren't mutually agreed on, the sentiments certainly are. Megatron's intentions are perfectly honorable."

"That relationship will not be looked on kindly by Autobots," said Jazz. "There's been enough propaganda implying an indecent association, it'll only make it worse."

"But it means both the AFF officers and Optimus himself will be accorded far more respect by the Decepticons," said Strika. "And the Decepticons will view the alliance as far more legitimate. It will make joint operations far easier."

"Additionally," said Shockwave, "There is considerable historical precedent for a sparkbond being used to cement an alliance."

Arcee was glaring at him. Oh slag. "Shockwave, it's all right. Isn't there something else you ought to be doing?"

Shockwave's antennae canted back. "My culture medium is almost done in the autoclave," he said. "I will go check it."

"There is no such precedent for Autobots," snapped Jazz. "None whatsoever. Unless we're going into Primes and Protectors, which would be..." he caught the look that Strika and Ratchet traded, and his faceplate went hard, "absurd. You're not actually thinking..."

"Yes," said Strika. "We are actually thinking. A shock, I know."

"Mecha are not going to line up gladly for a return to theocracy," snapped Jazz. "And all of us here know fragged well that the Matrix was just a badge of office, not a direct conduit to Primus Himself. It excused the Primes, not directed them."

"We were thinking of the human idea of a constitutional monarchy, actually," said Ratchet. "You did run across that in your research, right?"

Bumblebee groaned. "Sari spent *ages* on that in history," he said. "That stupid tutorbot." He looked around at them. "Hey, you don't think being a human's best friend was *all* fun and games, do you?"

"We're not humans," said Jazz.

"But some of their ideas might be useful," said Strika.

"Why are you so intent on finding a new Prime, anyway?" Jazz folded his arms. "Is it really going to make *such* a difference?"

"We've always been specialized," said Strika. "The dichotomy between Prime and Protector, between the spiritual and political leader embodied in the Prime, and the general, the warframes, embodied in the Protector, this allowed all of us equal voice in our lives, equal acceptance and equal

honor. When the position of Protector was eliminated under Zeta Prime, that was when our lives became commodities.”

“The way I heard it, you weren’t exactly equal to start with. Wasn’t the Protector supposed to be the sword in the servo of the Prime?”

“Yes, that’s what the Autobots would say,” said Strika. “More Functionist justification for our enslavement. No. Prime and Protector are to be equal, two halves of one spark.”

“So they have to be onlined together for the purpose from a split spark,” said Jazz. “Good luck with that.”

“Or share a powerful sparkbond,” said Strika.

“Warframes aren’t capable of forming powerful sparkbonds.”

Strika snarled at him, a sound like tearing metal that made all of them flinch back. She looked around, and Ratchet’s plating prickled with the realization that he was in a very small space with a femme who was built as a living weapon, and that she was more than capable of tearing every last one of them apart.

Silence. Jazz’s hand hovered over the compartment where he kept his nunchucks. Bumblebee’s stingers were out. Arcee had settled into a fighting crouch.

Bulkhead alone was nonthreatening, his servos spread, a worried expression on his faceplate.

“Primus’s bearings,” snapped Ratchet. “Stop being so overdramatic. Bumblebee, put those away this instant or so help me I will weld you over my office door. Arcee, don’t you dare. You’d think you’d never met a Decepticon before. Jazz, for Primus’s sake, you’re being an insulting crankcase, are you really surprised someone snarled? And Strika, don’t snarl, it scares the protoforms. Primus below, are we running an army or a daycare—*Bumblebee, put those AWAY, I said!*”

Silence prevailed. There were a lot of wide optics.

“Now,” said Ratchet, riding on the tide of shocked quiet, “Here’s what we’re going to do. We’re going to discuss the political future of this movement in a calm, adult manner, compensating for each other’s internalized misinformation. Then we’re going to agree,” he glared at every single one of them, “that what Optimus and Megatron get up to on their offshifts is none of our concern until they decide it is. Am I clear, or do I have to schedule the lot of you for fuel systems overhauls?”

Bumblebee, Bulkhead and Arcee looked suitably cowed. Strika and Jazz were still glaring.

“They made it our business,” said Jazz. “That was a public demonstration.”

“He said we couldn’t bond,” said Strika, servos clenched. If Ratchet had had that expression directed at him, he would have run for it, but Jazz seemed unimpressed. “That is an *unpardonable*—!”

“Beating the slag out of him for being stupid won’t bring Lugnut back,” said Ratchet. “Jazz, warframes form profound bonds. They just don’t do it frequently. When they do, it’s...exceptionally close. Don’t go around running your vocalizer about it. Some people won’t stop at snarling.”

Jazz stared at Strika. Strika stared at Jazz.

Jazz offered a servo. “I apologize. Didn’t realize it was a sore subject.”

Strika glanced at Ratchet, then took the servo. "Accepted."

"Good," said Ratchet. "Now, Jazz. We hope to reinstate Optimus and Megatron as Prime and Protector, respectively, then form a new council of mecha from all classes to form the actual legislative body. We've been considering Earth methods of appointing these mecha; elections seem most promising at this point. We're still working on it. But we *need* to give the warframes an equal voice; until we do, we won't have peace. The Prime/Protector relationship will be most useful if they are indeed sparkbonded. Think of it this way; Optimus will know what Megatron's up to, and have a greater ability to stop him if he tries anything unsavory. Additionally, Megatron's respect for Optimus implied in his decision to court Optimus will raise Decepticon respect of Autobot officers. All in all, it'll make the alliance stronger."

"And you're not concerned about Optimus?" said Jazz. "He hasn't exactly had the best history with these things."

"If by these things you're referring to the issue of Sentinel's behavior," said Ratchet, "I would tell you that you should have asked me that *in private*, without further compromising Optimus's autonomy or right to confidentiality."

"What's this about Sentinel?" said Bumblebee.

Ratchet glared at Jazz.

"The scraplet tub's been dropped," said Strika. "No point in trying to get them all back in now, Ratchet. What happened with Sentinel?"

"None of your fragging business," snapped Ratchet. "Optimus wishes it to be kept confidential, and that's his right. It doesn't compromise his loyalty in any way, shape, or form. Quite the opposite, in fact."

"I don't think you need to elaborate," said Arcee quietly, and looked around at the rest of them. "We can put it together ourselves. Not a word about this outside this room, any of you."

"I can't put it together," Bumblebee complained. "Come on, I wasn't here the whole time. What *about* Sentinel? Were they fragging or something? Because that would be..." He trailed off, looking from Jazz to Ratchet to Arcee.

"It does matter, Ratchet," said Jazz quietly. "Not because it brings Optimus's loyalty into question. Because of Optimus's safety. We need measures in place to protect him. When mecha like that see their victims leave them, they get *worse*, not better. Optimus is in more danger from Sentinel, not less, than he was on Cybertron. When I left he had a 'capture not kill' order on his helm, and a hefty reward as well. Ostensibly for interrogation, but all of us know better than to believe that."

"And when Sentinel finds out that Optimus is involved in a new relationship, Megatron will become an equally high-priority target," said Arcee.

"So..." said Bulkhead, "MRD detaining Bee and Sari was some kind of control thing Sentinel was doing to Optimus? That's *sick*."

"I'm concerned that he'll fall into a similar relationship with Megatron," said Jazz.

"Megatron would *never*," snapped Strika. "I know you hold your Autobot idea of Megatron as the sadistic manipulative monster very close to your spark, but it is not the case. What happened to your esteemed little leader was exactly the sort of thing he started our war over. Not only the Autobot plans to kill us so they might live. Not only the slow guttering of our civilization. The daily injustices,



too, the torment and exploitation of those too low to notice. The mecha trapped and hurt.” She looked thoughtful a moment. “If this got out among us, it would win Optimus even greater loyalty. An Autobot, a possible Prime, who understands what we’ve been through, who is one of us, would be a great thing indeed.”

“It will *not* get out,” snapped Ratchet. “Optimus has a right to privacy.” He glared at Jazz. “And to make his own decisions. Don’t compromise his autonomy any further. The last thing he needs is to feel like he’s permanently damaged because of Sentinel—*he isn’t*.”

“Then it will not get out,” said Strika.

“It won’t help with the Autobots,” said Jazz. “They’ll want to know why he put up with it for so long, and why he didn’t just leave. They’ll think he’s weak for not leaving.”

“But if Sentinel was threatening Sari, he *couldn’t*!” Bumblebee looked around at them. “Right?”

“Yes,” said Ratchet, grudgingly. “Though many times, the abuser doesn’t even need to threaten anyone else to keep control.”

Bumblebee looked thoughtful and deeply unsettled.

“Now,” started Ratchet, and pandemonium erupted outside the office.

Something thumped. Glass shattered. Someone *shrieked*. Tires skidded, there was another thump, and Shockwave exclaimed something that sounded very upset.

Blurr started screaming.

---

There were limits to how much one’s interface equipment would put up with within a certain amount of time. At least neither of them were due to go on duty for a while, and Optimus stretched out over Megatron’s back kibble, feeling sore, relaxed, and very happy. Megatron wasn’t quite in recharge; Optimus could see the reflected glow of his optics on the berth padding, and his vents weren’t rattling as they usually did.

This was nice, just being quiet, touching each other, feeling the gentle rumble of Megatron’s systems under him. Even Megatron’s back kibble was comfortable if you arranged yourself right. Optimus hummed happily, and dropped his helm back down onto the warm metal under him.

Megatron shifted a stabilizer and something buried in the berth coverings at the foot of the slab started buzzing.

“Frag,” muttered Megatron. “Can you get that?”

Optimus pushed himself upright and down Megatron’s frame, rummaged in the metalmesh until he found the source of the buzzing, and dragged it to the surface so he could find the off switch. He looked at it, and said, before he even thought it out completely, “One vibrator equals a closet of ‘dastardly delights’. Typical, really.” Then he realized what he’d said and felt heat flush up to his audials with embarrassment.

Megatron shifted a little and made a questioning noise.

“Propaganda,” said Optimus hastily, still embarrassed. Even if Megatron had had his faceplate buried between his legs less than a megacycle ago, he felt like an idiot for bringing it up. “You’re uh, supposed to have a storage closet full of uh, this.” He gestured to the vibrator.

The stabilizers he was sitting on shifted as Megatron turned to actually look at him. The edge of his intake twitched, and he sat up fully, lifting Optimus so he could swing his stabilizers to the floor. He stood, gestured for Optimus to follow him, and crossed to one of the storage cupboards near the washracks. He waited for Optimus to join him (vibrator still in servo), and pulled the door open.

*Things* cascaded onto the floor. Some of them bounced. Some of them wiggled. Optimus stared, his processor scrambling to make sense of the objects in front of him. It was only when a gently jiggling false spike the size of his servo and lower arm together rolled to a stop against his stabilizer that he realized what exactly he was looking at.

“Do you know where the whole story about Decepticons being perverted came from?” asked Megatron, in a tone of greatest resignation as they looked at the gently wiggling contents of the enormous cabinet.

“This?” said Optimus.

“More or less,” said Megatron. “Strika decided I needed something to, ah, keep me company after things went badly with Starscream. She stole half an interface goods store and presented it to me. Publicly. As tribute. The only reason she never did it again was because Starscream stole one of the false spikes on the grounds it matched his paint job.

“So after that, she started looting them from ships she captured and presenting them along with the rest of the cargo—discreetly wrapped to discourage thieving seekers. I had to put a stop to that after she stole Kup’s entire collection. He snuck aboard the *Nemesis* and stole them back—taking her collection on that ship for good measure. Kup and Strika do not like each other very well, not after that. And I am left with this.” His gesture encompassed the gently wobbling pile, the worryingly metallic objects, the incongruous organic feather that stuck out of the middle. “I *used* to be able to discreetly pass a few of them back to Lugnut. I *used* to space a few every so often when I didn’t think she or any of her proteges would notice, but things have gotten out of servo in my absence. One mech cannot *use* all this!”

Optimus looked at the vibrator in his servo. It seemed very small.

“In fact,” Megatron went on, “I’m not even sure *how* to use half of this. I simply haven’t had time to deal with it.”

“Strika, uh,” oh no, he was going to giggle, he could feel it building up in the back of his vocalizer, because the pile was *so* big, and Megatron looked *so resigned*, and oh dear Primus, bits on the outskirts were still *moving* and what would all those other cadets who’d been fantasizing about Megatron’s attentions in the Academy *think* if they saw this, “Strika doesn’t do things by halves, does she?”

“It makes her a very good commander,” said Megatron. “And a very dangerous friend.” The corner of his intake turned up. “It wasn’t even as if she only brought me false spikes. Some of these *clearly* require a partner.”

“At least to get them back in the cabinet,” said Optimus. They looked at each other, and it was too much. The giggles won.

Even when things were going well, even when he hadn’t done anything wrong, he never would have been able to feel this relaxed around Sentinel. They wouldn’t have laughed about something like this—this wouldn’t have happened in the first place. Leaning against Megatron, still giggling helplessly, Optimus realized this was totally different from any other relationship he’d ever been in... and it felt *good*.



## Chapter 52

Ratchet surged upright and out the door before anyone else had done much more than stiffen in surprise. He came to a screeching halt in the medbay, and groaned at the sight that met his optics.

Shockwave stood still in the center of the the room in his Longarm guise, the autoclave cart overturned, and culture medium and glass around his stabilizers.

Blurr cowered on the berth, servos scrambling for a weapon, screaming for help at the top of his vocalizer. There were tire tracks up the wall and a bit of blue paint on the ceiling; the force of Blurr's panic must have revved his engine enough to send him up the wall, a common problem with speedsters—Ratchet had pried Bumblebee's horns out of the base's ceiling enough times to not be alarmed, but Ambulon was looking distinctly worried.

"Stay back," he said to Strika. "Longarm, get out of there. Now. Bumblebee, Bulkhead, with me. Jazz, you too."

Jazz pushed past him. "Agent Blurr," he said, "report!"

Blurr lowered his arms and snapped to attention, as much as he could sitting on the berth. "Jazz Minor, sir! Longarm Prime is a Decepticon spy, he attempted to offline me, sir, using a compactor, sir he is very dangerous and must be contained immediately, sir!"

Jazz looked back over his shoulder at Ratchet and the others. "We know about Longarm," he said.

"Then why is he walking around free?" demanded Blurr. "He's a Decepticon!"

"The situation has changed," said Jazz, and sat on the berth opposite. "We won. But Shockwave offlined Ultra Magnus."

Blurr's expression was stricken. "Ultra Magnus is dead?"

"Yes," said Jazz. "Sentinel took over."

Blurr sat bolt upright, quivering with suppressed outrage. "That idiot? He wouldn't know the Hammer from his spike casing begging your pardon sir but *really* what was the council thinking Rodimus Prime would have been much better or even Optimus, I know Optimus isn't popular but he's competent I was intending to put that in my report, but really sir Sentinel Prime isn't worth Ultra Magnus's stabilizer, really he isn't."

Jazz waited for Blurr to finish his rush of words, then said, "Sentinel's regime has been worse than that. He started conducting processor experiments on the Decepticon prisoners, then on political dissidents. Including Optimus Prime."

"I know Sentinel doesn't like Optimus but that doesn't mean Optimus is a dissident how did he get that past the council Optimus wasn't collaborating with the Decepticons or anything there was no basis for an arrest."

Jazz sighed. "Blurr, on Cybertron, right now, what you said about Sentinel is basis for an arrest."

"You're joking maybe he's also a Decepticon agent though I don't know when he *could* have been placed his record is long with no apparent inconsistencies and..." Blurr looked down. "Sorry sir, getting off topic sir."

“It wasn’t just Optimus,” said Jazz. “It was people who agreed with him. Ratchet and Optimus negotiated asylum for them with the Decepticons.”

Suspicion crossed Blurr’s faceplate.

Jazz exvented heavily. “We’ve formed an alliance,” he said. “We’re trying to overthrow Sentinel’s regime before we see a full return to Functionist policies. Optimus’s political movement, the AFF, had a large number of members who have sought asylum with us, both military and civilian—and including myself, Arcee, Bumblebee and Bulkhead. We were concerned that Sentinel’s regime might either use you in further experiments, or attempt to use you as a bargaining chip, so we brought you with us. You are currently aboard the *Conqueror*, the flagship of the AFF/Decepticon alliance, under the joint command of Optimus and Megatron.”

Blurr just looked at him. “How do I know this isn’t Shockwave hacking me?”

“Training,” said Jazz. “Remember when I pulled you out of the tar pit?”

Blurr nodded. “Am I confined here?” he asked.

“No,” said Ratchet. “You’re in perfectly good health. We’ll find you quarters as soon as possible.”

“I’ve already sent the notification to Slipstream,” said Strika, which made Blurr flinch violently again.

“She’s still online?” he hissed to Jazz.

“You know, usually Megatron’s the one who gets that reaction,” said Strika, sounding quite cheerful about it, and stepped into the room. “Welcome aboard, Agent Blurr. What Jazz hasn’t told you is that standing orders regarding Autobots taken by the AFF is that, if they so choose, they may be returned to Autobot custody. No interrogation. Nothing. If you do not wish to be here, you are free to go.”

Blurr looked at Jazz. “Sentinel wouldn’t allow anyone who’d spent time in Decepticon custody back, not without extensive interrogation at the *least*.”

“Exactly,” said Strika. “Until you’ve made your decision, we’ll prefer you stay away from essential areas of the ship, or sensitive information. I’m sure you’ll understand.”

“Yes,” said Blurr, still suspicious. “I understand.”

“The second bunk in my habsuite is unoccupied,” said Jazz. “I’d like to request Blurr as a suitemate.” Strika gave him a look of polite confusion, and he said, “Intelligence mecha stick together.”

“We’ll consider it,” said Strika. “There’s a priority queue for mecha looking for suitemates. In the meantime, I’ll have Smokescreen show you around.”

Jazz and Blurr looked at each other, doubtful. After a long breath, Jazz nodded. Ratchet let out a huff of relief.

---

“I’m not going to place them together,” said Strika. “I don’t trust Jazz. Not yet. And Blurr hasn’t made his mind up. I think I’d better place him with Smokescreen. That room’s adjacent to Jazz’s, so they won’t feel like we’re keeping them separate. But I don’t trust Jazz.”

“Probably smart,” said Ratchet. “Jazz is still sore about losing Prowl.”

“A sparkmate?” said Strika.

“Would have been, I think,” said Ratchet.

“Ah. I wondered.” Strika’s voice turned into a growl. “His comment had more than the usual vitriol to it.”

“Sorry about that.”

“Oh, my plating’s thicker than that.”

They lapsed into uncomfortable silence. Ratchet stole a glance up at her. Her optics were dim, narrowed in thought.

“Have the sleep aids helped?” he asked.

“Yes.” Silence again, abruptly broken by an inappropriately cheery strain of music, a lot of voices singing all at once. Ratchet had an abrupt sinking feeling. He knew what that was. *Dammit, Arcee!*

“What the frag?” muttered Strika. It was coming from the rec room.

“Arcee brought Earth music with her,” said Ratchet, quickly. “And is sharing it one recording at a time. So far, that’s the most popular.”

*“I polished up the handles so carefully,”* sang a multitude of voices, several of which belonged to weapons of (planetary) mass destruction, *“that now I am the ruler of the Queen’s Navy!”*

“I believe it’s called the *HMS Pirouette*—Pinafore, some strange human word like that, I’m not sure,” said Ratchet. “Apparently the subversive themes of the original translate surprisingly well to our current situation.”

Within the room, Blitzwing switched from Icy’s precise tenor to Random’s imprecise screech, a noise that Gilbert and Sullivan certainly hadn’t had in mind when they composed the score. Ratchet soldiered on regardless.

“More likely, it’s just complex enough to be interesting, and possible to sing in the washracks. Arcee says if you think this is uproarious—”

*“STAY CLOSE TO YOUR DESKS AND NEVER GO TO SEA AND YOU ALL MAY BE RULER OF THE QUEEN’S NAAAVY!”*

“She’s intending to give them something called Kesha when they get bored with this.”

Strika gave him a strange look. “That means nothing to me.”

“Me neither. I just wonder how she got her servos on it.”

Strika ex-vented heavily. “Days like this, I used to wonder whether Magnus had to put up with this slag.”

“Believe me,” said Ratchet, with *feeling*, “he did. Frequently.”

Silence again. “Ratchet...” started Strika, and then looked away.

Ratchet waited for her to speak again.

“You’re right,” she said. “I do need a friend, more than anything else just now.”

He reached up and put a careful servo on her arm, swallowing back the regret. "I understand," he said.

---

Another strategy meeting. Optimus, trying not to walk oddly, leaned over the holotable and frowned at the troop distributions. Megatron had spent megacycles on them, he knew that, but there was a big weakness at the left flank. A standard Autobot company would smash through that easily.

How to tell Megatron? He didn't want Megatron angry with him, but it had to be done. He reset his vocalizer. "The left flank is weak."

He winced when Megatron looked up at him.

"We don't have much to reinforce it with," said Megatron. "Where would you suggest we pull the mecha?"

Optimus looked back down at the display. Was Megatron angry at him? Of course he would be, Optimus had just questioned him in public. But he couldn't let the relationship interfere in his duty. He squared his shoulders. "Here," he said. "We can spare these frigates and sloops."

"Very good," said Megatron, and though he smiled, a knot of anxiety twisted under Optimus's spark. He hid it.

The meeting dragged to a conclusion, and afterward he turned to Megatron before he could say anything. "I'm sorry, I needed to—"

"Why are you apologizing?" said Megatron, looking at him with real surprise.

"I uh, I..." Optimus stared at him, lost for words.

Megatron put a careful servo on his shoulder. "I'm not angry with you for pointing out a mistake. That's exactly what I need you to do. I need you to tell me when I'm wrong, and I won't be angry with you for doing so. You're my equal."

Optimus looked away. "I'm sorry. I just... I don't..."

Megatron's servo lifted and he knelt in front of Optimus. "I don't care what any of your previous lovers told you or expected of you, Optimus," he said. "We are partners, above all things. We are here to make the universe bow to us; I don't expect you to bow to me. We are partners, and there is no need to be deferent to me, no need to apologize or to submit when you don't want to. I don't care whether you like your spike or valve better. We are equals, and if all goes the way Ratchet and Strika hope it does, we will be Prime and Protector, and you as Prime *cannot* defer to your Protector in all things. We must *balance* each other." He cupped Optimus's faceplate in one massive servo. "I know what I ask is difficult. But it is our duty nevertheless." Optimus looked up at him, to find that he was smiling. "Ours, Optimus. We're leading our people. Together. And you have every right to correct me if need be."

"I'm sorry," said Optimus. "I just...I'm not accustomed...I'm sorry."

Megatron leaned their helms together. "No need for apologies," he said. "None. I don't know what happened with Sentinel. And I won't ask, not unless you want me to. But I am not him, and you do not need to fear offending me."

Optimus looked into his optics, then on impulse wrapped his arms around Megatron's shoulders and held on. Megatron's arms settled around him as well. "Oh, my little one," he said into Optimus's

audial. "I would follow you to the Pit and back, if you asked it. Do not feel lesser to me, I beg of you. You aren't."

Optimus offlined his optics and an involuntary keen escaped his vocalizer. It was different, it was scary, and it sounded like Megatron meant it, meant it with absolute certainty, which made it even worse. He wasn't even sure why, just that this was different, and he wasn't sure what was expected of him, because he'd only ever had experience with Sentinel. What else had he missed? He wasn't sure, but on top of all of it, here was Megatron telling him that he loved him even though he'd been doing everything wrong. He tried to stifle the next noise, because Megatron would think less of him for it, but Megatron merely kept stroking his helm and back.

"Primus below," said Megatron, softly. "I'll offline Sentinel myself for this. Do not be ashamed. Scars are not something to be ashamed of. You defy those who gave them to you by living. Take pride in your defiance."

It helped. It really did. He would tell Megatron how much it helped but right now leaning against him felt too good. *Keening* felt too good, embarrassing as it was.

"Take pride, Optimus," said Megatron. "You live, you defy them; that is something to be proud of. You're not damaged, no more so than I." A servo moved over his back. "No more so than I," repeated Megatron, very quietly, and there was a roughness in his voice that Optimus could not place.



## Chapter 53

He could trust Megatron.

Optimus tried the thought out, somewhat disconcerted by how strange it tasted in his mind. He could trust Megatron. Megatron had held him, and whispered praise into his audials, even as he keened. Megatron had seen him like that and still thought well of him—even though he was a Decepticon and hated weakness.

Megatron had sounded like he understood.

Optimus wasn't sure if he'd ever trusted Sentinel. There'd always been an edge there. For all he'd retracted his plating for him, he'd never felt as intimate with Sentinel—even when things were going well—as he did with Megatron.

Megatron wanted an equal. That, too, was strange, but he could do that. Against all laws of Cybertronian nature, he could do that. It even felt better.

And he had someone he could let his guard down around. He'd been close to that with Ratchet and the team, but never had let it down to the extent he had around Megatron. And Megatron was still with him. That in itself seemed incredible, but it was true, and Megatron still treated him with the same careful consideration he had before, the same open affection, the same respect and praise.

And after that, after being so supremely selfish as to break down in such a manner in front of someone, he felt better. He couldn't explain it, but it was as if he'd turned a corner. He still hurt, sometimes, but he didn't feel broken in the same way anymore. Confidence returned—and remained, even in private. Even around Megatron.

The really difficult part was finding out how to cast the entire situation in such a way that wouldn't be offputting to the Autobot members of the alliance. Optimus put as much emphasis on the 'formal courtship' part of things as he could, and kept up his equal role with Megatron, making it clear that he'd not allowed the relationship—or his role therein—to affect his abilities to command. Soon, rumor had it that he was a spikemach, and wasn't Megatron in for a surprise when they actually bonded.

He...tried not to listen to that. He couldn't quite articulate why he didn't like it yet, but he didn't like it.

And as reasonable as Decepticons were about interface, they were still pretty unreasonable about a lot of other things. Like leaving organic planets alone ("But the resources! We can refine them into energon, and only 15% of their population will suffer adverse effects!") and piracy ("The Galactic Council's unlikely to miss *one* convoy going to Quintessa!") and the use of weapons of mass destruction ("What? Why can't we deploy plating-melting acid rain over that Autobot base? What do you mean we can't send Overlord, either?! Primus, Autobot, you're *impossible!*").

Optimus learned how to say no to them and make it stick, hard. Even when he sent Strika storming out of the room with irritation at his 'impracticality'. Megatron even stopped arguing with him and started listening, and at one point curtailed one of the more vicious suggestions before Optimus did, then smiled down at Optimus.

Of course, yes, his scruples meant energon was harder to come by. *That* meant alliances, which were even more difficult. There, Bumblebee and Bulkhead were of great use; their enthusiasm and interest

in organic species were surprisingly flattering to species who'd only encountered Autobot aloofness or disgust, and Optimus had the feeling that their group had broken some significant barriers between technological organisms and organics. Not everything went well, of course; one memorable incident ended in them being chased out of Klingon space by what seemed like half of the Empire's military might, and they had all agreed not to talk about that one encounter with those *extremely* creepy technorganics that threatened to assimilate them. And the Ammonites were, as Strika put it, just plain spike casings.

But enough trade treaties were successful—they did, after all, have the raw materials of mining worlds to sell, and Autobot ships often had a few materials that were in high demand elsewhere but useless to the war effort—that they were soon off energon rationing. Weapons weren't a problem; they had theirs, and the captured ones from the Autobots, and even enough to sell afterward. *Only*, Optimus insisted, to species with equally advanced technology.

Other planets started rebelling. And two of the first were suppliers to the Autobot military, suppliers that created the raw materials needed for the upgrade of the Halcyon Junction. They complained of lowered rations and raised quotas, and of military response to protests.

From then on, it was a desperate scramble to find out where the Halcyon technicians were getting their materials, taking the worlds if possible, stopping shipments, everything they could. Small fleets of shuttles lay in wait on shipping routes, waylaying likely cargo ships. Jazz and Shockwave reluctantly conspired and created a secret communications network, broadcasting news of Decepticon victories, Megatron and Optimus's political speeches, recruitment information. Strika's spy network grew.

Revolutions took time. Nothing Optimus had read had imparted that particular jewel of wisdom. People rebelled, one planet after another. Sometimes they won. Sometimes the best they could do was evacuate refugees.

Things seemed to go best when he could go with Megatron, work together to win worlds their freedom. Sometimes they were needed in two places at once.

Late into an organic night on a strange little organic planet, where the insect life cheeped and chirred in the tall trees, and condensation clung to their plating as their fans worked desperately to cool them from the hot, cloyingly humid atmosphere, they looked down at a starmap. One of the Autobot holdings, and the new Alliance's victories.

"Three solar cycles," rumbled Megatron, appreciative. "Three solar cycles since Earth, and now we have seventy percent of Autobot holdings."

Optimus looked, too, and folded his servos in front of him, wincing at their clamminess. Their new holdings lay in a circle around Cybertron. A noose, the part of his processor that had spent far too long on Earth prompted. With a brief moment of pity, he wondered if Sentinel could feel it tightening. Poor foolish Sentinel, who wanted vengeance and petty victories, and nothing more, who'd been thrown into this situation as a puppet. He missed that old friend from the Academy, the way he'd banter, the way he'd thought. Anything but pity seemed wrong. Sentinel had had no idea that he was meant for this, to take the fall for this.

But he'd done terrible things, and he would have to answer for them. To do otherwise would be to disgrace the offlined. At the least, though, Optimus would ensure that he answered for his crimes in a court, a fair and civilized court, instead of to a mob, or alone in some unmonitored cell. Whatever happened to Sentinel, it would be fair, as it would be for any other Cybertronian. He owed his once-friend that much, at least.

"Victory is near at servo," said Megatron, as if savoring strange words. "My spark, it is a very good thing indeed you are with us, rather than against. I have never known a campaign to go so quickly."

"The same to you," said Optimus, feeling a little uncomfortable, as always, with the high praise.

"The universe would fall at our stabilizers, if we turned our attention to it," said Megatron.

"No eternal Cybertronian Empire," said Optimus, firmly. "That's not what we're fighting for."

"Oh, my Prime, you are too kind," said Megatron, grinning at him. Optimus made a face.

"Don't call me that," he said. "The Matrix hasn't accepted me. We have no reason to believe it might."

"You are far superior to any Prime I've ever known," said Megatron cheerfully. "I have no doubt of your abilities. It seems only right. And I do so love the idea of being your Protector. Do not disappoint, please."

Optimus looked away, embarrassed.

"Besides, the military rank should still be yours, no matter what Sentinel or his government thinks."

Optimus looked down at his maps. "Let's get back to work."

---

Strika sighed and looked at Ratchet across the table. "I still don't trust either of them. They're charming little bots, really, they are, but I don't trust them."

Good mech, he knew what she was talking about, and snorted. "You'd be an idiot to trust Jazz," he said. "He was audials-deep in Sentinel's confidence when he defected. He hasn't backstabbed any of us yet, but that doesn't mean he won't. He's as smart as either of us. Good thing you have Shockwave monitoring him on the communications project. And Blurr's a good kid, but arrogant and with a major grudge against Shockwave."

"He only threw Blurr into a trash compactor," said Strika. "Lugnut once dropped me into the engines by accident."

"By *accident*," said Ratchet. She made a face at him and took another gulp of energon. Across the mess, Smokescreen and Slipstream bickered.

"Are you writing to her again? You're writing to her again! You big softy."

"Shove off, Smokey."

"What'chya sayin'?"

"I'm telling her that I have a subordinate who is a *pain* and gets into my *personal space* *Primus dammit Smokescreen give that back!*"

"Oooh you think her thrusters are cute? You like her wings? She makes your spark go all fluttery and your—*ouch gerroff!*"

"I'm going to turn you into nuts and bolts! I'll blend you into a slurry and feed you to *the Phase Sixers!* You little—*no biting!*"

“Eeugh, when did you last have a wash, you taste like a drippan!”

“I’m going to *weld you over Megatron’s door you shameless little fragger!*”

Strika turned back to Ratchet and away from the sound of an overturning table. “They’re getting along well.”

He blinked at them, obviously taken aback. “Really?”

“You are still hopelessly Autobot,” she said. “Megatron and Optimus should be back sometime this offshift. We’ve located one outpost that’s been giving most of the military support to and been handling communications encryption for the Halcyon Junction. I’m sending Smokescreen and her team there to cause as much damage as possible.”

“Good,” said Ratchet. He finished his cube and propped his chin on a servo. “I have the first operation on Skywarp today. The tool Professor Sumdac provided works beautifully. At least, in theory.” He ventilated heavily. “At least I don’t think I can hurt him worse with this thing.”

“What is it and what does it do?” asked Strika.

“It’s an outgrowth of human 3-D printing technology,” said Ratchet. “It’s a stylus that produces small quantities of material on command. You feed it in at the top, it gets melted into malleability, and produced at the tip. Very fine control; they worked out some of the issues with it solidifying unevenly. But what’s really unusual with this one is that it scans as it goes, and produces material based on the ones surrounding it.”

“So it will let you patch processor circuits.”

“In theory,” said Ratchet. “The injury in question is tiny. Pharma’s servo must have slipped, just a little. We’ll see if we can fix it.”

“I wish you the best of luck,” said Strika. “Thundercracker’s been fretting.”

“Him and Slipstream both. I wish it hadn’t taken me so long.”

“There’s only so much you could do.” She narrowed her optics at him, close as she could get to a smile, patted him on the shoulder. “I need to go spread tyranny through the universe. Or at least welcome tyranny home from its most recent battle, get a report out of it, and make sure it recharges before heading off again.”

“Good luck with that, whichever of those two you’re trying to make behave.” Ratchet winced as Slipstream tackled Smokescreen to the floor and started pulling on her head flanges. “Can you do something about them?”

Strika shrugged and strode over, seized each by the collar fairing, and lifted them apart, then walked out of the room while the two smaller cons wriggled and complained in her grip. Mostly blaming each other, good.

The admiring look on Ratchet’s faceplate was really quite nice to see.

Most of the medical staff was deep in recharge by the time Megatron and Optimus’s shuttle came back in. The pilot put it down in the shuttlebay, then, in a shocking breach of protocol, disembarked by himself. “They’re asleep,” he said. “I wouldn’t disturb them if I were you.”

Strika glanced into the shuttle. Just as he’d said, there was Megatron, deeply in recharge, face down

as was his wont—his back kibble prohibited any other position—and Optimus, sprawled over the ridge of said back kibble, snoring just as loudly, deactivated energon axe dangling from one exhausted servo.

“Let them alone,” she said to Smokescreen. “He’s right. They need the rest.”

## Chapter 54

They were in a shuttlecraft.

It took Optimus a few moments to realize that they were actually in a shuttlecraft, because his current position—draped over Megatron's back—was so much like their usual arrangement in their own berth that onlining his optics was somewhat jarring.

Shipboard light streaked down through the open hatch and onto the empty helm console. They were back. And someone had let them recharge instead of waking them up and sending them to a proper berth. Optimus sighed and pushed himself upright, waking Megatron in the process—there was a confused grumble under him and he had to scramble quickly before Megatron sat up and dumped him on his aft. “They left us to sleep,” he said, as Megatron looked around the shuttle.

“Strika,” said Megatron. “Just her style. Come on, let's get the bugs picked out of our joints before anything else.”

Optimus nodded, and winced as something went crunch in his neck articulations. “Yeah, good idea.” He stood, as Megatron stretched, rubbed the back of his neck and made a face.

“You've slobbered on me, Autobot,” he said.

The impulse to apologize rose instantly, but he knew Megatron well enough now he was able to tamp down the initial surge of anxiety and smile instead. “It looks good on you,” he said.

Megatron snorted explosively and grabbed for him. He darted out of range with a laugh (something else in his arm joint went crunch) and down the ramp of the shuttle with Megatron in amused pursuit.

No one was in the shuttlebay, so no one saw the two commanders of the Alliance participate in a brief bout of chase that ended in both of them going down in a giggling tangle on the deckplates.

“Did you get *all* these scuffs on your mission?” demanded the medic on duty, a new arrival from one of the old colonies—the treaty with Caminus had reopened communication with many of the old generation ships, previously hesitant to reestablish contact with a regime that might take away their autonomy—a very small, very ill-tempered femme by the name of Nickel. She prised something with a lot of legs out from under one of Megatron's shoulder guards. “Also, this is disgusting. I am not paid enough for this slag. Ew. *Do you see these legs?!*”

“Yes,” said Megatron. “Imagine what they felt like.”

Nickel's harrumphs rivaled Strika's, which was impressive given the size of their source. She scooted over to Optimus.

*“I suppose I should be grateful that she didn't throw it in my faceplate,”* sent Megatron.

*“There's a reason she gets along with the Justice Division,”* sent Optimus, and moved so Nickel could check his arm joints. “Nickel, where's Ratchet?”

“In surgery,” she said. “They're working on Skywarp.”

---

Ratchet ventilated deeply, raised his helm. The disinfectant seeped into his joints, warm and deceptively pleasant on the aged joints. Next to him, Ambulon and First Aid did the same.

“This feels right,” said First Aid, after a few moments. “This feels really right. We’re fixing what we did.”

“Don’t get cocky, kid,” said Ratchet. He looked through the glass into the operating room, at Skywarp’s still figure. “We can still frag this up. No promises.”

“Pharma would have,” said Ambulon quietly. “Not you.”

“None of that,” snapped Ratchet, finished scrubbing in, and stepped into the operating room.

It was dingy, and old, and painted Decepticon-purple, at least in the places the paint hadn’t peeled off. Oh, he’d tried to get it brought up to something that would pass most sentient species’ definition of ‘up to code’ but it was unfortunately pretty far down on the list of things the Alliance had materials for. If the flakey paint wasn’t falling into anyone’s internals, various people didn’t see the problem, perpetually undermanned as they were. The lighting was good enough, barely, the tools were basic but functional and clean. All in all, not a patch on MRD’s facilities.

*Please*, he thought, uncomfortably aware it was very nearly a prayer, *please let this work*.

“Come on,” he said aloud. “Let’s see what we can do.”

---

Strika watched Slipstream, and was proud. The younger femme had every reason to be a nervous wreck, but none of it showed, and that pleased Strika enormously. An *Autobot* commander would probably have relieved her from duty for the shift, knowing that her spark-sibling was undergoing surgery, but Strika wasn’t an Autobot. One did one’s duty regardless, no matter the concern over one’s close friends. Being emotionally compromised was a luxury, and better that Slipstream work through it now than later, when the stakes might be higher.

Slipstream was doing very well. She wished that the two Autobot flyers that Megatron had brought in after Messantine would do likewise, but that was too much to hope for.

Most of the Decepticon flyers still weren’t sure what to make of their guests. They were Autobot in origin, that much was definite; they were fairly small, and brightly colored, and acted distinctly Autobot. But the coding lifted from Starscream sent strong signals to every Decepticon around them that they were also Decepticons, and that was strongly unsettling. They were hybrid, and the first instinct was to label them as abominations and let it be at that.

Megatron had thought they were members of Optimus’s team on Earth, and that Optimus would be pleased with his ‘rescue’ of said *unwilling* team members. It turned out he’d been completely, laughably wrong; they’d been members of *Sentinel’s* team, and Optimus didn’t appreciate sentient gifts. Everyone on that deck gained a brand-new appreciation for the sheer volume Optimus could achieve when he was well and truly outraged, and given his background, Strika was relieved to know that he was indeed capable of making his objections so well known to a partner. There’d be no question among the Autobots after that incident, and Megatron had been in a guilty sulk for days afterward.

Optimus had good reason for his outrage. Jetstorm and Jetfire had all but formed a trine with Sentinel, but Sentinel, slag his vicious prejudiced little spark, had taken every opportunity to push them away, to the extent that no true trine bond had formed; no unconscious synching of sparks and

coding from close proximity, none of the necessary trust, none of the instinctive protection. It made things enormously easier—though that wasn't saying much. It had taken the better part of an orn to persuade the Autobot flyers that no, the Decepticons were not going to eat them, or dissect them for parts, or keep them as berthwarmers, or lobotomize them, or melt them down, or drink their energon, or do any of the above to any Autobot involved in the Alliance. Strika had gone from disbelieving irritation to horror as she'd realized just how young the Jettwins (as Ratchet called them) were. They were all but newsparks, online, indoctrinated, experimented on, and thrown into battle. Oh, it was a familiar story—indeed, her own story—but it *hurt* to see it still happening. It hurt to see two newsparks taught to fear the people who were most like them, who could help them most.

Thank Primus for Jazz. She still had to repress the urge to space the fragger at least once an orn; he was Autobot right through, in a way even Optimus wasn't, and damned if she'd trust him further than Nickel could throw him. But the scared Jettwins had recognized him, instantly relaxed, and actually *listened* to him. It still took time to persuade them that they weren't about to be chopped up for rations by the Decepticons, but they did calm down around him, and within the stellar cycle, and with the addition of a jetpack to Jazz's standard equipment, the trine bond had settled. Late, which wasn't the best for their development (what the *frag* had the Autobots been thinking, only online two of them?), but it had settled. They still weren't so happy about Decepticons or Optimus, but it meant they didn't have to be imprisoned.

And *frag*, but they were adorable. The Decepticons hadn't seen newsparks—clones, unfortunately, as they lacked sparks (and, fortunately for Slipstream and her siblings, the trining necessity as well), failed to trigger the appropriate protective coding—in millions of stellar cycles, and Strika was fairly sure *everyone's* protective coding online around the Jettwins. Which only made their skittishness more distressing for everyone involved.

“General, Agent Blurr's returned,” said Slipstream. “He says he'd like to meet with you as soon as possible. He's refused to make a formal report yet.”

“Oh good,” she said. “Tell him I'll see him in my office immediately.” The refusal to make a formal report meant it involved the Halcyon Junction. And if this was the report she thought it was, she could send Smokescreen off on that mission, the first really big blow against the project she'd be able to strike. If it worked, if Blurr's information was accurate, they might kill the Junction within the orn.

---

It was several megacycles before Ratchet got out of surgery, and Optimus excused himself from the conversation at the mess table to see him.

He found the medical bay in boisterous spirits. Ratchet and the surgeons were all obviously exhausted, but still cheerfully joking, and Ratchet greeted Optimus with, “Glad to see you in one piece, Optimus! We did it!” He paused. “Well. We *think* we did it. The electrical currents in his processor match his baseline scans from when he was captured. We won't actually know until he wakes up, but in the meantime, we think we've repaired him.”

Optimus grinned. “That's incredible! Well done, Ratchet!”

Ratchet snorted. “Thank Professor Sumdac's little creation instead. It wouldn't have been possible without it.”

“Yes, but you were the one to design the specifications for it,” said Optimus. “Take a little credit. Does Slipstream know?”

“She's in with him now.” Ratchet smiled again, still looking dreamily off into the distance. “It'll be



interesting trying to apply this to the other injuries, but at least it looks promising.”

“Optimus?” Optimus looked up. Ambulon looked back down at him, his shoulders stooped; he habitually hunched to fit in among the smaller Autobots. “Could you make sure he gets to a berth and recharges?”

“I will,” said Optimus. “Come on, Ratchet.”

---

He found Megatron in their quarters, reading.

“Did the surgery go well?” he asked, as Optimus headed for the washracks, wanting to get the last clinging particulates off his plating.

“Ratchet thinks so,” he called over his shoulder. “He’s not sure yet.”

“If he thinks so, he must have really performed a miracle.”

Optimus laughed, and turned on the spray, relaxing into the warm solvent. It had been ages since he’d had *warm* solvent; that last planet hadn’t been particularly conducive to cleanliness of any sort.

He was happy, he realized, watching the muck float away down the drain. As much so as he’d been on Earth, maybe even more. He had his team. He had Megatron. And he was doing the right thing. They had a *chance*, they could win this. Forget being a Prime, because that probably wouldn’t happen, and he hoped not, because he didn’t *want* to be Prime. Creating a government under which the oppressions of the past would not be recreated, though, that was a worthy cause, and he was happy to be advancing it.

Feeling distinctly more alive, he dried off, found the wax, and wandered back into the berthroom. Megatron saw what he was up to, and came over to help him with his back before he’d even finished with his stabilizers. He returned the favor, working carefully over Megatron’s back, enjoying the pleasant stir of arousal as he did.

“Might we try something?” murmured Megatron, turning his helm to look up at Optimus. “I’d like to use my valve.”

Optimus felt himself flush hot and return to familiar stammering territory. “You’d like me to... You’d trust me with...”

“With anything,” said Megatron, smiling. “If you’re amenable.”

Optimus nodded, tossed the waxing cloth aside and climbed off Megatron’s back. Megatron turned over, legs apart, and Optimus climbed between them. A digit pressed under his chin, pulling him forward and into a hot, hard kiss. Megatron’s panels clicked open as he deepened the kiss, dominant and biting. Optimus relaxed; he knew this ground, and submitting made the remaining tension Megatron’s request had provoked ebb from his frame.

“See,” murmured Megatron, “I don’t need to use my spike to remain dominant.”

Optimus relaxed into his caresses, the servos running over his frame. One cupped his interface paneling and rubbed, demanding. He obeyed. Megatron took his spike in one servo and stroked it,

toying with his anterior node. Optimus let out a low groan and leaned forward, optics offline, servos trembling on Megatron's frame.

It stopped. "Good," said Megatron. "Now touch me."

Optimus reached down, past Megatron's spike, and ran his fingers along the outside of Megatron's valve. He found the anterior node and rubbed it, trying to recreate what Megatron did to him. Megatron grunted, pushing into the touch, and Optimus sped up a little, enjoying the way Megatron's intake fell open, his optics becoming unfocused.

He slipped a tentative finger into Megatron's valve, startled at the instant moan it produced. It was oddly bumpy, too, as if there were far more sensor nodes than there should be. He explored it carefully, getting a better idea of what he was touching. There was a double row of the little bumps on the roof of the valve, and a single row on the bottom, all closely spaced—and given the way Megatron already had a servo pressed over his faceplate and was emitting the little gasping groans that he only did when extremely aroused, they were indeed all sensor nodes.

"Stop *teasing*." A servo took Optimus by the hip and pulled him in. "Spike me already, Autobot."

Optimus resettled himself, nervously, used a servo to steady his spike, and pressed himself in.

It was slower than he expected, and he had to withdraw slightly and rock forward again several times before Megatron relaxed enough to fully admit him, and then he stayed where he was, gasping. It was good. It was *really good*. He wanted to move but he didn't want to hurt Megatron—he'd heard that not using one's valve for a long time could lead to it being oversensitive. He looked at Megatron, who'd propped himself upright against the head of the berth. "Are you all right?" he asked.

Megatron made an impatient noise. Servos clamped around his hips.

"Don't just sit there," Megatron purred. He tried a thrust, and that was really *really* good, and then Megatron's servos were less guiding him than actually moving him. Optimus's optics whited out and he threw his helm back and panted. It was so good, was all he could think, tight heat and Megatron all around him, it was like the first time Megatron had actually spiked him.

Megatron stilled, servos trembling in overload, and Optimus braced himself on Megatron's frame and kept moving, chasing his own overload. Megatron gasped and made a little high pitched noise with the sensitivity afterward, but Optimus knew what the receiving end of that was like and kept moving, the shudders of Megatron's valve around him heightening each thrust.

He pushed Megatron over again before he overloaded himself, slumped gasping onto Megatron's broad chest. Megatron petted him. "Primus, you're good with your spike."

He smiled up at Megatron. "You're good with your valve."

Megatron chuckled. "Anything more you wish to try tonight?"

In the end, it turned out they got more recharge on the shuttlecraft than their first offcycle home.

## Chapter 55

Optimus regretted the lack of recharge the next morning, namely because it involved combat training with Strika.

Optimus had tried in vain to protest that no, he didn't need combat training, he was an Elite Guard officer, slaggit, he *had* training, but Strika insisted. Strika's method of insisting, the first time, had involved slinging him over one shoulder and walking away while both he and Megatron sputtered in indignation. Megatron, slag him, had stopped sputtering when Strika shouted the reason for her impertinence over her shoulder.

She turned out to be right. That too was embarrassing. Optimus knew how to fight, but Strika knew a lot more, and a number of things besides that would have made his instructors at the Academy go hot to the tips of their audials. She spent an entire session teaching him all the different ways he could kick someone in the interface paneling, and readjusting his hips and telling him to shift his weight and how he kicked until he was doing it hard enough. She gave him brief instruction on where to bite, if it came to that, and what bits on Autobots were sensitive and could be grabbed and wrenched. She had him extend his grapples so she could get a look at them—he felt rather awkward standing there with her turning one of them over and over in her servos, and at the end of *that* she said, “Take them to Ratchet and tell him to put an edge on the tips. We'll work on what you can do with them after that.”

“But I use them to save people, not kill them!” Optimus protested, appalled. He'd always been proud of his ability, that it wasn't about fighting, but about preserving life. Even Sentinel's shield was purely warlike! He looked down at the grapples. He managed to use them in fights, but he was glad they weren't designed for that. If he put blades on them...

“Try letting them save you,” she said.

“No,” he said. “I'm not turning them into weapons. What if I need to grab someone—an ally—with them? No.”

“Stubborn little Autobot,” muttered Strika. “Have it your way.”

Then she took issue with the way he hit. Namely, his palm strikes.

“Don't leave the thumb out,” she snapped, after watching him. “Stop curling the tips of your digits in. Again.”

Gritting his dentae, he obeyed.

“Thumb,” said Strika.

It had never caused him trouble before. He said as much.

Strika looked mildly amused. “Here, hit me.”

Given the rest of the day, he was more than happy to do so. He struck—and Strika moved, grabbed his thumb, and pulled.

He tried not to make a disgraceful squeak, didn't succeed, and went very, very still, looking at the massive digits holding his thumb.

“Now, I can do all kinds of exciting and novel things from here,” said Strika, altogether too cheerful. “I could drop you on your faceplate. I could dislocate the digit. I could rip it off. I could also just crush it.” Her optics narrowed at him in a smile and she let go. “Keep the thumb pressed against the side of your open servo. It will not get in the way of the blow, but leaving it sticking out is a great boon to unpleasant people like me.”

After that, he did.

Today, they were sparring. He was glad she’d finally decided he could handle the sparring, but she was still treating him as if he were made of something fragile, and that was driving him nuts.

What was even more embarrassing was that he was still having trouble holding his own. Still, he wished she’d stop pulling her punches. It felt condescending and he’d rather have the dents. Certainly, he knew that if she were going at her usual force, one blow could kill him, but the extent to which she was being gentle made him feel like a protoform.

Primus, she wasn’t even fighting as if she were a serious opponent. None of the servo-on-the-neck-cables-guess-what-cadet-Optimus-you’re-slag business his instructors at the Academy had favored. No, she’d pick him up and tuck him under one arm and if he didn’t manage to wiggle free or make her let go—and biting was an option, though the time he’d tried it she’d laughed and told him he might want to consider sharpening his dentae—she’d announce she’d won and put him carefully back down and they’d start over. What the frag kind of opponent would do that? He doubted she did this kind of thing with Megatron.

All in all, this was incredibly frustrating and made him feel incompetent. Not a good thing to feel with an enormous Decepticon surging toward you, intent on teaching you, no matter how gently.

Said enormous Decepticon hooked her stabilizer around one of his and yanked, sending him to the ground. He planted a stabilizer on the mat, tucked the other knee up, ready to kick, and watched her. She circled him, and he rotated to keep facing her.

A flicker of her optics was all the warning he had, and he braced himself against the ground with his shoulders and used that to power the kick. On a smaller bot, a bot his own size, the kick would have landed in the neck cables, bruising and possibly breaking them. On Strika, however, it was a solid blow to the interface paneling.

She said something that sounded like, “erk,” very quietly, and took a step backward.

He uncurled from his position on the mat. “Are you all right?”

“Primus,” she said, sounding a bit choked, then, “I’m fine.”

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I didn’t mean—”

She held up a servo. “I’ve only been trying to get you to do that for the last three orns,” she pointed out. “Stop apologizing. Good kick.”

“Sorry,” he said again.

“Shut up,” she said. “I’ll be fine. I reinforced the armor there for a reason. You may not be entirely incompetent. Primus, Megatron won’t let me hear the end of this.”

---

He was in fact more restrained than Strika obviously expected him to be, but that didn’t prevent Megatron from vast private amusement at her predicament. Served her right for underestimating

Optimus. Oh, certainly, the Autobots had trained him to fight like an officer and a gentlebeing, which wasn't useful, but he did learn fast... and there was a reason he'd prevailed on Earth. Improvisation was his strong suit.

The fearsome little Autobot was asleep, this early in the morning. Megatron had carefully shrugged him off his dorsal plating and arranged him on the berth, marveling at how Optimus trusted him so much that he'd allow himself to be moved about without waking. Now he looked down at him, smiling slightly, at the way he'd burrowed into the berth coverings, at the way his servos twitched in his sleep, then turned and went to the bridge.

Strika was awake, looking through a report of some kind over the holotable, a cube of midgrade in one servo. "Good morning, my lord."

Megatron smirked. "And how are you feeling this fine morning, General?"

"Frag you. Smokescreen's mission to the communication and security facility departed two megacycles ago; they'll be maintaining radio silence until the mission is complete. Blurr did produce usable information."

"You think we can trust him?"

"Smokescreen's been keeping an optic on him, and seconds Shockwave's assessment that, while he does have reason to hold a grudge, his own evaluation of Sentinel Prime's competence, and his personal connection to Jazz and Optimus Prime's original spacebridge team are strong enough that his reports are trustworthy. Additionally, I have corroborated his reports with those of our trustworthy operatives and there has been very little discrepancy."

"Good," said Megatron. "Though I still have doubts about Jazz."

"Don't we all, my lord. But the weight of evidence comes down on his side, and at least he treats the little flightframes decently."

"Promising, yes, but also dangerous."

"We're keeping an optic on him too."

Megatron huffed out a vent and folded his arms. "What a mess the Autobot side of things is."

"It's a revolution. Hard to tell enemies from allies. We were much the same."

"Unfortunate blows aside, how is Optimus doing?"

"He's a remarkably fast learner. And very proud. He should hold his own perfectly well."

"Good." Megatron paused. "Any news from Cybertron?"

"Sentinel's regime remains robust," said Strika. "Shockingly enough. One would think that an entire planet couldn't be that stupid, but we've all been surprised before. Other than that, no news."

"Mmm."

"Nothing new since that amusing little meltdown of Sentinel's one of our operatives caught when the footage of that kiss made it to him."

If Megatron had been less self-controlled, he would have snickered. He was quite sure that, whatever Autobot difficulty was generated by that kiss, watching the ah, extent of Sentinel's reaction had been

worthwhile. Things had been thrown. If that operative survived the war, he'd make sure the bot had a comfortable retirement.

Which brought up one of his other concerns. "Sentinel's interest in Optimus does seem to exceed that of a standard jilted lover. Do you know why?" He asked casually enough, watching Strika as he did, and was gratified to see her stiffen.

There was a pause. She wasn't looking at him.

"I think," she said, choosing her words with the care of someone sorting warheads, "that Optimus would not thank me for telling you, and it would cause you more ah, personal trouble than is worthwhile, my lord. As for Sentinel's interest, I have been taking strategic measures to address it. Telling you would not confer a significant enough strategic advantage to justify it to either Optimus or his primary physician."

Megatron nodded, tamping down the mixed satisfaction (that he'd been right in his suspicions), and anger (at what he'd been right about). He'd had enough time to observe Optimus to know that something had been very bad about his relationship with Sentinel. He'd only been able to guess, nothing concrete, and the lack of anything concrete was maddening.

And Optimus was so very good at hiding things. Megatron respected that; it meant the smaller mech was proud. If he wished to keep the past in the past, so be it. Mecha coped in their own ways. Megatron himself had enough ugly incidents in his history to give anyone nightmares, and he preferred not to invite them into the present.

Though if things progressed, he'd have to address them sooner or later.

He thought about Optimus, curled in the nest of bedding, servos worrying at the edges of one covering, the perpetually worried, stiff expression relaxed as it only was in interface, recharge, or now—just very recently—in Megatron's company.

Long dormant protocols to protect civilians stirred hopefully within his processor. He mentally stamped on them. For one thing, 'protecting' Optimus denied that he was a warrior. For another, he would tolerate no true, habitual, subservience in this relationship, his own or Optimus's.

A traitorous thought offered the image of Optimus curled in his arms, happy, relaxed, accepting lead-dusted energon crystals, and other dainties from his servo, his weapons long since set aside, the crest of a true Prime on his forehelm.

Megatron considered this. True, it wasn't as appealing as conquering the known universe with his beloved fellow warrior at his side, but he supposed Optimus wasn't as fond of that sort of thing as he was. He'd settle for conquering the universe in both their names, then returning to a happy mate and a Cybertronian utopia. That would do nicely.

All they needed to do was defeat the Autobots for once and for all.

Megatron folded his servos and smirked.

---

It wasn't a good day.

He spent most of the morning with the AFF command staff, discussing the selection of an ambassador to Caminus and the colonies. Then he dealt with the accusation that Decepticon intelligence was giving lower priority to Autobot-gathered intelligence; Blurr, fortunately, backed him up on that. Then there was the matter of the handful of Decepticons who wished to ally

themselves with the AFF and receive Autobot emblems, and answer to Optimus, not Megatron. Optimus rubbed his nasal guard and tried not to groan. That was going to be something to resolve with Megatron, first in private where Megatron didn't have to play to any Decepticon political factions, and then in front of said factions, so no one would accuse them of a lack of transparency.

Then there were the disciplinary issues, as there were every week, and the casualty reports, and going over the battle plans for the next offensive and ensuring that everyone felt the Decepticon-created (specifically Strika-created) made the best use of Autobot assets. Very few people felt they did. Of them, Jazz and Blurr had the most useful input. Then Bulkhead spoke up with spacebridge progress, and the question of access brought them back to the Caminus problem.

It wasn't resolved by the time Optimus and the battle plans were required on the bridge. There, Strika objected to several of the changes, Megatron objected to three entirely different ones than Strika's, and Shockwave corrected a bit of one of Jazz's items of intelligence. Jazz was called to the bridge, and subsequently Blurr. Blurr and Shockwave started arguing such that Strika, losing her temper, took one of them in each servo, bashed them together, and dropped them into the corridor, locking the doors behind them. The screeching was still clearly audible.

Jazz and Shockwave, according to Strika, were both right. She delivered a bit of information that made one of Optimus's more clever little compromises entirely useless, and they all went back to staring at the plans.

This still wasn't resolved by the end of their duty cycle. Optimus went with relief to refuel, then back into that meeting. Far later than it should have been, it resolved, and he limped gladly in the direction of his shared quarters...and his comms went off. One of the Autobot shuttles had an issue.

One massive fuel leak and several comedic pratfalls later, Optimus tried to limp back to the quarters...and into a confrontation between Tarn and two of the minibots, a former reporter and a small bot who wouldn't fragging stop talking. The reason behind the confrontation became abruptly obvious; one of the minibots had dropped a bucket of tar, and Tarn, not paying attention to what he was doing, had gotten stuck. Optimus, paying no more attention than Tarn, had also become stuck. He had to be lifted out, and the closest mech to do that was Overlord. The consolation for that was that Tarn was hardly happier with this than he.

Sticky, deeply insulted, and generally torqued off, he resumed his trip back to his quarters.

Blurr and Bumblebee were having a race in one of the wider corridors. Optimus learned this when they both crashed into him. Fortunately, they were only just starting and so he wasn't badly injured, but the extensive collection of small dents hardly helped anything, and spread the tar and oil further.

He lurched through the doors to his quarters, said, "Not a *word*," to Megatron, and stumbled into the washracks.

He set about trying to scrub out the oil and the tar, wincing as he encountered the dents. The process was incredibly frustrating. The tar wouldn't let go, and it was largely on his stabilizers, which meant he had to balance awkwardly to scrape at it.

A genteel cough from the entrance to the washracks. "May I help?"

Optimus teetered precariously and gave up. "Fine," he said. "You'll do better than I am."

Megatron stepped in and turned off the spray. "Sit down."

Optimus obeyed. Megatron sat across from him, dampened the cloth he held with something from

the small bottle in his other servo, and picked up one of Optimus's stabilizers. "I appreciated your patience today."

"Patience? I wanted to space everyone!"

"Exactly. What in Pit happened to you?"

"Fuel tank failure on one of our shuttles—nonsentient—then some incident involving tar and Swerve and Circuit, *and* Tarn, and Overlord, and then Blurr and Bumblebee ran me over while racing."

"You have been busy." Megatron peered at the small dents and the mess, and grinned. "So has everyone else, apparently."

Optimus snorted, relaxing into Megatron's touch. It hurt when he encountered the dents, but feeling the stickiness of the tar lift was a blessing.

After a long moment, Megatron asked, "Have you considered a spark bond?"

Optimus reset his optics at him, then nodded.

"By no means does it have to be immediate," said Megatron, still scrubbing. "I would like to consider it."

"Me too," said Optimus. Megatron looked faintly startled, then went back to the tar, watching Optimus from the corner of his optic as he did.

Optimus felt himself go slightly hot. "We're compatible?"

"Oh? And how would you know that?"

"I put in the appropriate medical request. I was just...trying to find the right time to ask you."

Megatron chuckled, low and pleased. "My dear little Prime."

Optimus sighed. "I'm not..."

Megatron dropped a kiss on top of his helm. "I know. But you protest so prettily."

That was a Pit of a thing to hear while someone was scrubbing tar off his plating. Optimus went hot all over again and resisted the urge to press his legs together. Megatron, as if he hadn't noticed, went on scrubbing, looking thoughtful.

"You realize that if we were to go through with it, it would mean no more secrets?" he said, after a time, met Optimus's optics. "Not even if we wanted to keep them."

Optimus reset his vocalizer. "It's worth it. If... if you feel the same way."

"I do."

Optimus looked down. There was one thing he hadn't mentioned, something he didn't want to, if it were only one spark on the line. But it wouldn't be. That was the point. He didn't have the luxury of selfishness. "What if one of us is offlined?" he said. "Often—"

"One death can kill both partners, yes," said Megatron, optics flickering.

"What if I'm killed? I can't put you at risk like that—"



Megatron ventilated heavily. “Do not fear for my spark, Optimus,” he said. “I have survived the death of other partners. It is not as uncommon as it is made out to be.”

“Oh.” Optimus looked down. He’d heard implications, but Megatron had never said it frankly to his faceplate before. He’d been afraid to ask further, if so. It was kind of a relief. He couldn’t bring himself to talk frankly about Sentinel, and that Megatron had his own things he didn’t talk about made him feel like less of a bad partner. “I’m...I’m sorry.”

Megatron put a servo on his shoulder. “Don’t be,” he said. “There are political considerations, Optimus. One is that—should one of us be offlined—regardless of the second’s survival, the existence of the bond will greatly strengthen our alliance. For if I trusted you with my very spark and you trusted me with yours, it will be proof of a great confidence just when our followers will need it most, strengthening our cause just when many might see it as weakest.”

He put the stabilizer down and started on the other one. They sat in silence.

Optimus took a deep vent. “I still want the bond. I’ll...just try and stay out of the way of anything too lethal.”

Megatron chuckled. “Do.”

Silence again. After a while Megatron turned on the spray, lifted him and kissed him.

“How soon?” he asked.

“We can start soon,” said Megatron. “You can’t make a bond with one merge. That only happens in bad Autobot romance tracts.”

Optimus snorted. “As if the Decepticons don’t have equivalents?”

Megatron chuckled as well. His servo found Optimus’s aft and squeezed. “The answer is, we can start whenever we like.”

“Tonight?” He knew he sounded ridiculously hopeful, and couldn’t help a self-effacing grin.

“Tonight,” said Megatron, paused. “You...realize that because I’ve been bonded before, there’s still a little of him there? I don’t want you to be startled...”

“It’s all right,” Optimus said. He reached to turn off the spray, lurching a little in Megatron’s grasp. “I know. I paid attention when Ratchet gave me the lecture.”

Megatron put him down so they could dry off, then carried him into the berthroom. He hesitated, then went to the table by the berth and pulled out the only item in the topmost drawer, clicked it on, and handed it to Optimus.

“That’s him,” he said softly.

Optimus looked down at the tiny hologram, the sort of cheap thing that one might have made at a spaceport, a souvenir and little more. The mech in it smiled, a build much like Megatron, but obviously older. The smile was a very kind one, a little mischievous, above all gentle.

“His name was Terminus,” said Megatron, and took the hologram back, not looking at Optimus. “He looked out for me when I was first upgraded. He ensured I survived my first battle. When that war ended, we sparkbonded.” Now he did look at Optimus. “A pity you two never met. You would have liked each other.”

He paused, glanced away again. “He was assassinated soon after I came to power. They hoped I would die. I did not.”

“I’m sorry,” said Optimus.

Megatron looked down. “It wouldn’t bring him back,” he said. “I...I think he’d be very happy, if he saw us now. He lived even longer than I did under the Functionists, and suffered greater injustices. You’re as good as he is, on the battlefield. He’d... be glad we have victory within sight at last. He suffered Megazarak’s reign to gain it.”

Optimus didn’t know what to say to that. He stared at his servos on his lap instead, trying to find words.

Megatron put the little hologram generator in the drawer. “I apologize; it is difficult to talk about him. I am too accustomed to keeping it private.”

“That’s all right,” said Optimus. “I...had guessed, but I didn’t want to intrude.”

Megatron smiled, a very small bit, and sat down next to him, gathering him into his arms. After a few vents, he toppled over backwards and sideways, dragging Optimus back with him. Optimus yelped protest, then lapsed into giggles. Megatron turned him around, kissed him soundly again, putting a hand on his waist.

Optimus reciprocated with pleasure, recognizing the urgency in Megatron’s movements.

---

The sparkmerge was put off by simple fragging. It wasn’t until both were in the limp bliss of post overload that Optimus touched the plating over Megatron’s spark and found it hot. “Here,” he said, before Megatron could say anything, and parted his own sparkplates.

Megatron looked down at him with wonder in his optics, reached out. “May I?”

“Yes,” said Optimus.

Megatron brushed the cornea with a very gentle digit, and Optimus shivered at the sensation, entirely unlike the careful, clinical touches of medical instruments that had been, until then, the full extent of any contact with his spark. Megatron’s digits twined in the energies, the little bolts that stabbed out to meet his fingertips. Optimus gasped. It felt—it felt good, intimate, like nothing else.

Megatron hesitated a long moment, and then his chestplates opened.

They were the same size. Of course they were. All Cybertronians were, when you got down to the spark, but it was still strange to see such a small thing animating such a big frame. Megatron’s spark whirled, bright and growing brighter, already reaching for Optimus. Optimus almost wanted to see if he could do the same thing for Megatron as Megatron had for him, but Megatron met his optics then. “May I?” he asked again.

“Yes,” said Optimus, and Megatron pressed down over him.

It was bliss. It was pleasure like nothing else—and at the same time, it was like the point in a conversation when one started finishing the other’s sentences. It was coming home, it was comfort, it was welcome, it was supremely right, it was like sudden companionship after long unnoticed loneliness, when the only realization of the profound misery is relief. Optimus sobbed and clung to Megatron, who shook. There was grief from him, more acute with the solace from it, and Optimus leaned up into the great, lonely, grieving spark above his and gave his all, even as he felt it move to

soothe him.

## Chapter 56

### Chapter Notes

Content warning: This chapter contains a scene with attempted sexual assault (skip the italicized memory if you don't want to deal with it), and both Sentinel and Megazarak being themselves. In other words, this is the chapter the tags warned you about.

“Sentinel Magnus, the Decepticons made an announcement. I think you should see it.”

“Really? What could they possibly—” The aide put the datapad into his servo, and Sentinel looked down at it. He stared at it.

One vent. Two, while the universe stalled out in appalled horror around him.

Then he threw the pad into the wall and put his helm in his servos. “That dirty little—!”

A sparkbond? Megatron had made an honest mech out of the little ‘facetoy? That he’d publicly acknowledge he was involved with Optimus was tactless enough—*Sentinel* had at least had the good taste to keep his affair quiet, Optimus was hardly the sort of mech you brought to meet your superior officers—but this? This, a *public* announcement of a *sparkbonding*? Of course, Decepticons did that sort of thing, but this...this would undo all of his hard work on the propaganda, because sparkbonds were...were respectable. A sparkbond necessitated equality. Everyone knew that.

Megatron had, with one announcement, banished any suspicion that Optimus was a little fool being manipulated by his love of spike. Megatron had just established Optimus as his equal, *in berth*, as well as on the battlefield, and no amount of propaganda would get that out of people’s processors. And he knew Autobots well enough to do it.

That was...that was frightening, because it had never seemed that Megatron was much aware of Autobot traditions. The barbarian had never paid them much attention. But suddenly, he was canny enough to manipulate them—or had he been all along?

And even if he could defeat the Decepticons without hurting Optimus, drag him back to good sense and his duty as an Autobot officer, show Optimus that he forgave him... Optimus would never be his again, not with half his spark given to Megatron. He couldn’t get Optimus back. Not until Megatron was dead.

A sparkbond! Who would want to do that with Optimus? He was a double-dealing coward and a fool, good enough in berth, but *why* would you want to share your spark with him? Megatron was revolting, a Decepticon, but he was at least brave. Optimus wasn’t. Optimus would do anything he needed to to get what he wanted, and hid it behind a holier-than-thou attitude that could get up your exhaust pipe like nothing else. He was hot, yeah, but you didn’t sparkbond with mechs like him!

“Sir?” said the aide. Sentinel didn’t remember his designation. They didn’t stay for long these days, and they were often spies. He wished they were Decepticons, those were easier to deal with.

“I’m fine,” he snarled. “Why should I care what the Decepticons are getting up to?”

The aide looked uncomfortable. “You do realize the political implications with a Decepticon warlord

taking an Autobot as consort? It means they view Optimus as an equal. It could cause—”

“I know that.” Sentinel looked up at him. “I’m the Magnus, that’s my *job*. It’s not exactly something we can do anything about, now is it? Or do you have some cunning plan?”

The aide gulped. It was satisfying to see him so nervous. “No sir.”

“Then shut your intake. Do you have anything more than *gossip* to report?”

The aide handed him another pad. “There’s another work stoppage.”

“And you’re telling me instead of repressing it?”

“They’re complaining of fuel shortages.”

“We’re at war. Everyone must make sacrifices.” He thought of the leak-poor cube that had formed his fuel that morning and shuddered. “Everyone’s short on fuel. What makes them special? If they want more fuel, they’ll build faster. Repress it and stop bothering me.”

“It may cause more trouble...”

Sentinel stared at the mech. The mech met his gaze. Sentinel looked away, bristling at the reminder. He wasn’t in charge, not anymore. “Fine. Ask your masters, see if they’ll do any better than I am.”

The mech nodded. “Thank you for your cooperation. We’ll see about redirecting resources so the spacebridge crew can function.”

“Whatever you say,” snapped Sentinel.

He watched the mech go, seething. Oh, they thought they were coming out ahead, did they? They thought he was their puppet to use as they pleased? Weren’t they in for a surprise.

When the time was right, of course. He looked at the fallen pad and his intake curled. Unlike some people.

---

“Skywarp’s no longer frightened of everything,” said Ratchet. “That’s good. The other damage, however...”

“He’s good at repeating things,” said Strika, and huffed out a long vent.

“But he’s happier. We can work on the other issues now, but it’ll be less urgent without him in a constant state of panic. His comfort, as always, takes priority.”

“As it should,” said Strika, still looking sadly down at the datapad. “I hope Unicron has a special section of Pit for Pharma. All this.” She put the datapad down. “And then Lugnut.”

“I’m sorry,” said Ratchet. “I wish...”

“One commander’s life next to that of Lord Megatron is a very small thing indeed,” said Strika. “He would have agreed. I know I did the right thing; I knew it as I did it. I simply did not expect to survive.”

“We’re all glad you did,” said Ratchet. “We need you. Lord Megatron needs you.”

She snorted. “I know that, medic. I still miss him. Once he realized Optimus meant Megatron no

harm and was doing it out of genuine affection... he would have been very happy.”

“Protective, was he?”

“Even more than you likely saw. He would have been happier to wrap Megatron up in that material they use to transport spacebridge parts and leave him safely in his quarters. He didn’t much like Megatron fighting. Too risky. Fortunately, I dissuaded him when he tried to get that way about me.”

Ratchet chuckled.

“Enough,” said Strika. “See what you can do for Skywarp. I’ll be on the bridge.”

“Yes ma’am,” said Ratchet, and went back to work.

---

The difficult part was not spark merging at every opportunity, or even at the lack of opportunity; they left for the front in a short time, and privacy was scant. The good part was, after the sparkbond began to form, they didn’t need to. There was always a sense of Megatron in the back of his spark, one that grew with every merge.

It felt right. It felt incredibly right, and Optimus loved every moment of it. The greatest difficulty were the dreams, fragments of both their memories, shared back and forth, but none very long or coherent. That made up for some of the horrors in them; he remembered losing Elita, which slid into Megatron’s memory of Terminus’s death, knowing he’d been too late even to give Terminus comfort. But there were good memories too, watching Strika and Lugnut announce their bond, Bumblebee and Sari play video games.

And the battlefield became an entirely different place. They completed each other’s movements. It was like having two frames at once. He wondered if this was how the Jettwins felt. It was wonderful, and filled his spark with a bright, fierce joy. And with the two of them together, with the greater skill that entailed, it became easier not to offline their foes. That salved his conscience.

The bond strengthened. People fled when they saw them appear together on the battlefield. They could outdo many bigger mechs...and did, on occasion. But along with it, the dreams strengthened.

*His servos hurt. His servos stretched over his helm, held by stasis cuffs, the lines and joints of his arms hurt, he couldn’t move, and he was angry and terrified and revolted, and so, so helpless. His vocalizer hurt, and the words were more static than anything else, but he was still talking.*

*No. Begging. He was still begging, and there was the edge of a keen in all of it. No injuries that he could feel, not on him, but his spark hurt, reflected agony. He wanted to offline his optics. He couldn’t. Something wouldn’t let him move his helm or offline his optics. He couldn’t offline his audials. He wanted to, but that would be wrong, he’d be abandoning someone, someone who was screaming.*

*“Please please please, anything, I’ll do anything please,” he heard himself say. A tearing hiccup of static. “Please just stop. Please stop. Not him, please. Please, Lord Megazarak!”*

*A mech stepped into view and he flinched, or tried to, from the reaching servo. It caught him by the chin anyway and held him, and he stared up into the dead gray faceplate, the golden optics, the high crests of a general-class warframe’s helm. Golden optics set in a faceplate painted in grays, like a dead mech. Even the brand was gray, not the living purple it should have been. Long, wickedly curved claws dug into his sensitive throat cabling, and Megazarak bared his dentae, long fangs, and laughed.*

*“And what can you offer me, General?” he asked. The voice was not rough. He had been built by Autobots; they liked their commanders to sound refined.*

*There was something there. Some opportunity, something in the way Megazarak’s helm tilted, considering. “Anything you ask, my lord,” he said. “Anything. It’s yours. Please, just stop, don’t hurt him any more. Anything. Please, Master. I’m sorry.”*

*Megazarak smiled. Hope flared in his spark. He’d said something right. Anything Megazarak wanted, anything, he’d do. Anything.*

*“Anything?” said Megazarak, softly.*

*He sobbed, and forced his interface panel open. Cold air gusted over him. Megazarak glanced down, then back up, still smiling, still gently questioning. Not enough. He froze in horror, looking into Megazarak’s face.*

*He wanted to offline his optics, but this was a small price to pay for Terminus’s life. A small price, he reminded himself, and threw his spark paneling open as well. Whatever Megazarak wanted of him, it was his.*

*Megazarak reached for him. He shuddered, a deep reaction even the stasis cuffs couldn’t overcome, as the claws brushed his spark, twined in the energies radiating from it, and across the room he heard Terminus gasp a ragged denial. He tried to pulse assurance through their bond, but couldn’t muster it, not with the terrible wrong of someone touching him, someone touching the very core of him and he didn’t want this, didn’t want this, oh Primus, please no—*

*The claws withdrew. He sagged, gasping, knowing there would be worse.*

*“No,” said Megazarak, and reached out and forced his spark casing closed. He stared at him, confused and terrified.*

*“There is nothing you can do to appease me,” said Megazarak. “You have no control here, Megatron. There is nothing you can do to stop me. Beg, plead, offer me your spark and frame, it’s not enough.” Megazarak leaned in, smelling of clean fresh oil and hot metal. “You have no control over me. Once you accept that, you have learned this lesson.”*

*He heard himself sob. Megazarak smiled again, turned away, calling to the other mecha in the room, “Continue. Be sure not to offline them or I’ll be...displeased.”*

They gasped awake together on the rickety camp berth, and it took Optimus a moment to realize the gray servos around him were not his own, that the panicked vents in his audial belonged to Megatron. Both of them were shuddering with reaction, and Megatron pressed his faceplate hard into the back of Optimus’s neck and made a sharp little sound, his servos tightening to the point of pain.

“That was a memory,” Optimus said aloud, more to hear his own voice, to anchor himself back in the present. Behind him, Megatron shifted into a sitting position. He did likewise, to remind himself that he could move.

“Yes,” said Megatron, voice rough with static. “Yes, it was.” His frame heaved as he took a deep ventilation. “A four million year old memory. Our sparks getting to know each other.”

“Primus,” whispered Optimus, then looked up at Megatron. “I’m sorry.”

“I didn’t have a choice,” said Megatron. “I had to stop them. They were killing him, I could feel it, and because of some imagined slight I’d given Megazarak. I didn’t warn you—I didn’t realize...”

“It’s all right,” said Optimus. He was shaking too. “You did what you had to.” His own memories pressed up hard, making his tanks lurch.

Megatron looked away. “I defeated him, in the end,” he said. “I exiled him. He wasn’t even worth offlining. He’ll never lead us again; he’s not even a person to us. I should have warned you. That I couldn’t even speak of him to warn you...It galls me that he still holds such power over me.”

“Sentinel,” said Optimus quickly, and Megatron looked at him, the stiffness of his faceplates fading into confusion. “Sentinel told me, to keep Sari and Omega out of MRD’s servos, that he’d need me to make a gesture of trust. That he didn’t want to compromise my political beliefs, but unless he could have that gesture, he couldn’t do anything to save them.” He looked down at his servos in his lap, feeling himself start to tremble. “I...didn’t have much to offer. Then, looking at him, I realized he knew that. That he’d just hurt Omega and Sari to get my attention, not because of anything MRD requested. It wasn’t about trust at all, just him getting what he wanted, like always.”

“You,” said Megatron flatly, understanding.

“Me,” said Optimus. It was a whisper. “I couldn’t do anything else. I couldn’t let them have Omega, or Sari. I couldn’t run! Omega would have still been there, they could have found Sari on Earth, and even if I managed to keep them safe, what about the rest of the AFF? They believed in me. I couldn’t abandon them. So I let him do what he wanted.”

“What he did was rape.”

“No, it wasn’t,” said Optimus. “I didn’t fight him. He didn’t have to tie me up. I said yes.”

“He coerced you,” said Megatron. “You said yourself. He didn’t give you a choice. It was rape.”

Optimus offlined his optics. Megatron’s pronouncement was at once a relief and sickening. He didn’t know how to feel about it.

“You did what you needed to to keep yourself and your people alive. To survive. There is no shame in that.” Optimus looked up to meet his optics. They were uncharacteristically gentle. “Believe me. I know.” He lifted a corner of the berth cloths. “Here.”

Optimus burrowed in beside him, pressing his back hard to Megatron’s ventral plating. It grounded him in the present, chased the memories back. Megatron was here. He could trust Megatron, and he was here, now, in the present, and he thought there was nothing to be ashamed of.

“Thank you.”

“No,” said Megatron. “Thank you.”

Optimus reached for him over their bond with comfort, and sighed as the relief of Megatron’s spark greeted him, curled around him. The horror was still close, they both still shook, but it was bearable.



## Chapter 57

Ratchet finished the scan of Slipstream and motioned for her to get off the berth. “It looks good, but I’m not going to promise anything. This part of the processor seems identical between the three undamaged examples I have; you, Thundercracker, and Starscream’s original records. It does seem possible that I could replicate it and replace Skywarp’s.”

“Whatever you can do,” said Slipstream, looking down at her pedes. “I miss Earth,” she said quietly. “Sure, Starscream was an idiotic selfcentered fragger and I hated him. But I miss Earth.”

“I think we all do,” said Ratchet.

“I used to fantasize about Cybertron.” She was still looking away, her wings down. “A place full of people like us, a place where we were normal instead of big metal freaks. And then I found out what they really thought of us. I’m a sparkless abomination, and the Cybertron I imagined never existed. It was stupid. I’ve never even seen Cybertron. And I’ve spent my whole life fighting for it.”

“They used to do more cloning,” said Ratchet. “The Decepticons, during the Great War, there were a lot of people like you.”

“But I can’t have a sparkbond.”

Ratchet froze. Oh. That was it. “You know,” he said aloud, “I checked Starscream’s spark against my records for Windblade’s. Even if you did have part of his spark, you wouldn’t have been compatible. You can say that, if you need to.”

She looked at him, startled.

“This used to be a more common issue,” he explained. “And not every couple can sparkbond, Slipstream, even if neither is a clone. It doesn’t make the relationship any less valuable, or any less stable. Some of the happiest couples I know have incompatible sparks. The ability to form a bond is simply physiological. Being unable to do so is no reflection on either of you.”

She glanced down. “But I’m also a monster.”

Ratchet snorted. “Since when do you believe Autobot legal codes? That’s certainly true according to our *enemies*, but I know for a damned fact it’s not true by Decepticon law.” He looked down at her, realizing this wasn’t comforting. “You’re one of the most promising young officers Strika’s ever had,” he said. “You’re third in command of the Decepticons, at the age of what, five or six stellar cycles? That’s good by *human* standards.”

She smiled, weakly, looked away.

“The Cybertronian species as a whole is an incredibly diverse one,” said Ratchet. “We range in size from Bumblebee to Omega, we’re highly specialized, and the random mutations that give us our various abilities are considered damned near magic by other species. Pit, sometimes by us too. Did you *hear* what Blurr did? That run across the galaxy? He broke *several* laws of physics, and we’re still trying to figure out how. Mostly because he won’t tell us more than he thought getting to Cybertron was *really* important. Strika can take artillery fire full in the chestplates and not blink; she shouldn’t be able to do that. Optimus has been revived by the Allspark, and if that’s not magic, I don’t know what is. Really, he could be considered an undead abomination. In the scheme of things, missing a spark is a minor detail.”

Something fell and broke outside the office. Voices rose.

“Dammit,” said Ratchet. “I told them not to do their flirting thing here.”

“Who?” said Slipstream.

“Blurr and Shockwave. They’re flirting. Or trying to kill each other. I honestly can’t tell the difference anymore.” He stuck his helm out. “You two, knock it off!”

Protests greeted him, both faceplates conveying shock. “I’m having a private consultation,” he snapped. “Go elsewhere. NOW.”

He closed the door again. “Where were we?”

“Missing a spark is a minor detail?” said Slipstream.

“Exactly that. You realize there are a number of legal recognitions available to you even without a sparkbond?” She nodded. “See, it’s been an issue for some time. You’re not alone. Anything further?”

“No,” she said.

“Good.” He smiled at her, held the door for her (an Earth courtesy he found all his patients responded well to) and watched her go.

---

*The energon was everywhere, his servos, his chassis, and the stink of it crowded his olfactory suite. He looked up, searching for aid. None was there; no arial deviations, nothing. They were low ranked, after all, two small units in a great army. Two small units easily obliterated, and he gritted his dentae at the idiocy of the assault on the organics’ main stronghold. He could have done better, planning this, the fact he’d never been built for it be damned.*

*He looked back down at the young mech sprawled in his servos.*

*Megatron, wasn’t it? The other unit commander, newly online, the one who wrote poetry on his offshifts. Young, with their regiment less than a stellar cycle, and it only his fourth tour of duty, still faintly clumsy with his final upgrades. He stared up at nothing, optics vague with shock, vents hard and fast. One leg had been shot away, the major line in the armpit severed, and the mud of the planet was florescent with his energon.*

*No help was coming. He’d clamped the lines, but this young mech was going to die of it anyway. His spark hurt. He liked Megatron. He showed promise, curiosity, no worship of their superiors. Wasted, in a stupid operation by stupid mecha, thrown aside like a service droid, as if he had no more spark. As if he were not something capable of poetry or interest outside of battlerage, as if he were no more than the programming they’d installed.*

*He bared his dentae. No, you do not win this spark! he thought, at the gray sky, and the command ships that lurked beyond it, and reached for the one piece of medical equipment he wasn’t supposed to use, unless it was on a wounded superior. But there was no one left to save; the bodies around them showed that much.*

*“Stay still,” he rasped, and the glazed optics turned to him, some flicker of comprehension in their depths. He was momentarily impressed; most mecha would have lost themselves in the comforting haze of shock protocols, and that this one had not...*

*He set up the direct energon transfer, sliding the other end into the line in the crook of his arm without a wince. “Hold on, kid. We will survive this day.”*

*—And it was later, much much later. It found them panting, jammed in under a warship in its hangar, up against the exhaust manifold, where its energon footprint would mask theirs. Megatron had branched out from poetry, and what he had to say had angered a lot of people. They shared a secret grin. If the Council’s thugs were looking for them, they’d found the right people.*

*He’d jammed himself in after Megatron, so it would be his bulkier frame they encountered first, if they found them—but it was unlikely. The press of Megatron’s plating and the pounding thrill of escape and battle combined, sending heat through his frame. Once they got out of this, they’d have to find somewhere at least temporarily safe—and private. That Megatron had provoked such a response with just one tract... He’d follow the younger mech off the edge of the world, if that was what Megatron asked. He might be more experienced, but it was Megatron who led, and he hoped, with all his spark, that the young mech would be able to make his words reality.*

*Movement outside their hiding place. Terminus tensed. So did Megatron.*

*“I’m a friend,” said a deep, careful voice outside, the precise diction of a noble. He brought his weapons systems online, and the noble in question stepped into view.*

*“General Megazarak,” he said, keeping the shock down as best he could. “Why are you here, sir?”*

*Megazarak’s optics flicked from one of them to the other, and he smiled, baring sharpened dentae. “I have a proposal for the two of you,” he said. “We both want revolution, it seems. I have the resources. You have the sparks and processors of the populace. Why not ally?”*

*They looked at each other.*

*It was Megatron who said, very carefully, “Go on.”*

*—Later again. He shook with relief, Megatron, dearest spark, back safe and in his arms, after the treachery of the Council, unharmed and proud, and grieved, too. Pacificus had betrayed them. Maybe he should have been more triumphant, but he was too much the strategist to see how disastrously things might have gone.*

*And there was Megazarak to be considered.*

*Megatron hadn’t considered him, not yet, but he had, and Megazarak knew he had—the saw the way those yellow optics followed him as he went about his duties, the thoughtfulness on Megazarak’s faceplate, a waiting predator. Waiting for what, he did not know, but he did not like it. A mistake? Either way, Megazarak was plotting something.*

*He raised his helm, and it was a good thing Megatron was too preoccupied with biting at his collar fairing to see the expression on his faceplate.*

*He’d protect Megatron with his spark, no matter the cost. If Megazarak cared to try, he was welcome. He would die for his trouble. Megatron was protected.*

*He wasn’t the one in the end who protected Megatron, who ended Megazarak’s reign. That was Megatron, and part of him was proud of his bonded, and part of him was angry beyond words.*

*Because it wasn't Megatron Megazarak injured. It wasn't Megatron who would never transform again, never walk again without assistance, never go a day without pain. He couldn't stand by, a passive observer to a revenge that should have been his.*

*He watched Megazarak dragged away, hesitated a moment, looked back at Megatron, Strika and Lugnut and Starscream and all the others clustered around him, and before his mate could see him followed Megazarak and his guards, as quickly as he could with the crutches. They came to a halt in the shuttlebay, and when the mecha escorting the exile saw him, they parted. Megazarak looked up at him, the shock replaced by disgust. "You didn't even have the spark to commit honorable suicide. What good will you do him? Who will want a damaged second in command? You make him weak."*

*"I was wounded in Lord Megatron's service," he says. "There's no dishonor in that. No weakness or cowardice in my survival and continued service. If you were a true Decepticon, you would know that. But you're a noble, an Autobot wearing a warrior's armor, and too long have you murdered our strongest to hide your weakness." He smiled down into Megazarak's outraged faceplate, knowing he would anger him more that way. For a moment he toyed with the idea of killing Megazarak here, but he would think less of himself for it. It wouldn't be an honorable killing, not with the mech bound and helpless. "As for Lord Megatron's strength...this has always been his revolution. Within the next million stellar cycles, you'll be only a footnote. And I will still be alive."*

*Megazarak surged at him with a hiss. He didn't do him the courtesy of stepping back. "Do you think it was Lord Megatron alone who engineered your fall, Megazarak?" He smiled again. "You used me to hurt my mate, as if I were nothing more than my relationship with him. That was your mistake. Remember it over your stellar cycles of exile, and if we meet again..." He bared his dentae. "I look forward to tearing out your spark."*

*And with that, he turned away.*

*After all, there were galaxies to conquer.*

---

Megatron only realized he'd fallen asleep when he woke up, helm pillowed on the map of troop movements. He reached instinctively for Optimus's spark—funny how easily the old habits came back to him—and found it peaceful in recharge. He lay another moment, savoring the memory of Terminus, the feeling of him that lingered at a conscious level in his spark. At times, Optimus seemed so like him, but they were entirely different feelings, Optimus gentle where Terminus had been fierce, idealistic where Terminus had been cynical, dismayed when Terminus would have responded with wry humor, independent with an affection entirely different from Terminus's protective devotion.

He smiled a little, imagining Optimus taking on some of those behaviors, behaviors of a mech who stood a full helm taller than Megatron, and onlined his optics.

There was a ghost in the room.

At least, that was his first reaction. His second was to peer at it, looking for the telltale flicker of a hologram. There was none. Given that the mech was solidly blue all over, and somewhat transparent, it was very unlikely he was actually in the room.

He stared at it, trying to place the mech. He'd seen him before. Earth, if he remembered correctly.

For his part, the ghost looked no happier about the situation than Megatron felt.

“I do not believe in these things,” he told the mech.

“Really?” deadpanned the mech, looking at the floor. “*Really?* I refuse to believe the universe is this *badly run*.”

Megatron sat up and favored the ghost with his best unsettling smile. “Looking for someone?”

“You, apparently.”

“Killed you in battle, did I? My apologies if it takes a while to remember *who* exactly you are; the description applies to rather a lot of people.”

Part of the mech’s visor twitched upward. “How do you know I’m not a hologram?”

“No flicker.”

“Ah.” Optimus shifted in his sleep, and both of them glanced at him.

“I was expecting you to be here for him,” said Megatron. “He is, after all, the future Prime.”

“Mm,” said the mech. Megatron narrowed his optics at him, going through his memories of battling Optimus on Earth.

“Prowl, was it?”

“Yes,” said the mech.

“I didn’t think the Allspark was in the habit of letting people come back.” Terminus, fresh on his processor, lent an edge to the comment.

“Given that I joined the Allspark without dying, the rules are...somewhat different.”

Megatron frowned at him. Perhaps he was still in recharge. He might as well humor the creature.

“And what brings you here?”

“I must ensure that a second war does not begin,” said Prowl, as if he were quoting something.

“Which apparently means teaching you about Autobots.”

Megatron smirked, enjoying the insulted expression it conjured. “Oh? Do go on...”

Several megacycles later, he woke up. Sunlight streamed in the cracks and crannies of their temporary shelter, and there was a shuffle of materials as Optimus sat up. “You recharged on the desk, didn’t you.”

Megatron reset his optics rapidly, the details of the dream—even the specifics of what the dead Autobot told him—fresh in his processor, abnormally clear. “Yes,” he said slowly. “Apparently it results in very strange dreams.”

“I wouldn’t be surprised,” said Optimus, and went off in search of some midgrade while Megatron went back to the troop distributions, trying to ignore the vestiges of the dream.

---

"Intelligence reports say very little about troop movements," said Jazz. "But Sentinel has been trying to use the Magnus Hammer...and failing."

Strika chuckled. "Who didn't see that coming?" she said. "That weapon has a mind of its own. It serves the Protectors, no other mecha. Not politically-selected Magnus pretenders, the *true* Magnuses."

"I just look forward to seeing Sentinel's face when Megatron wields it successfully," said Jazz. "If only we could rustle up a Star Saber lookalike for Optimus to arrive with."

"One can dream," said Strika.

"General," said Slipstream, coming up behind them suddenly. "General, we've had news. Smokescreen and her team were captured."

The atmosphere went out of Strika's vents. "What can you tell me?"

"An Autobot commander of Outpost 56-B is trying to contact you to negotiate," said Slipstream. "He won't tell me anything. Says he wants to talk to you and you alone."

"I'll speak to him," said Strika. Her spark hammered with dread. This wasn't normal.

"General," said Jazz, quiet, "Smokescreen and her team are..."

"They're Decepticons," said Strika. "They know the risks...but we will do our best to reclaim them."

He nodded. Was that admiration, cautious but real, in his optics? She didn't spare more than a moment to wonder, already headed for the bridge.

The Autobot there was every inch one of Sentinel's officers, neatly buffed and supercilious. His intake curved into a sneer, grossly distorted by the size of the main screen. "*Ah, General Strika. I see you take the loss of your young protege seriously.*"

"Out with it, Autobot," said Strika. "Are you negotiating?"

That supercilious smirk grew. "*See for yourself.*"

She hadn't braced for this. She hadn't expected this. Even Autobots weren't such fools--but this one had been. Gray offline frames hung in stasis cuffs, each with a neat shot through the sparkchamber. Too neat. They hadn't even been able to struggle. Her optics found Smokescreen's still little frame among the larger frontliners, the gray where her bright red and blue should have been like a physical blow. Strika reset her optics, forced down the grief in her voice before it could betray her.

*Wasn't Lugnut enough?* something in her cried. *Haven't you taken enough from me?*

But people died. There was little that could be done about that, save revenge, save honoring their sacrifice by giving their murderers true justice.

"You killed them?" said Strika, very carefully keeping her voice even. Her optics fixed on Smokescreen's offline corpse, the dark optics, the hole through the spark chamber. Her servo clenched. "All of them?"

"All of them," said the Autobot, sneering. "You're insurgents. The rules of war don't apply. You're not entitled to an exchange."

“Is that so,” said Strika, very softly.

“You muckfraggers deserve to be back in the mines,” started the Autobot. “You don’t deserve to be treated like real combatants.”

“I see,” said Strika, and cut the channel. She felt Slipstream’s horrified gaze on her, leaned forward on the holotable, and offlined her optics.

“You can’t let them get away with that,” said Slipstream. “Why did you let him talk to you like that?”

“Slipstream,” said Strika, “Assemble the fleet. I want all Phase-Sixers here within the megacycle.”

She looked up. “I have no need of mere words when actions will convey my sentiments just as well.”

She organized the next small campaign with a cold spark, and when the Phase Sixers arrived, she had specific instructions.

"You will attend to search and rescue of the remains of Outpost 56-B. Locate and arrest any Autobot survivors." Then she switched the bridge recorder off, looked each in the optics. "I do not expect there to be any."

"I understand," purred Tarn. Overlord just smiled. Black Shadow and Sixshot's optics blazed excitement.

"Good," said Strika, opened the fleetwide comms. "All mecha, beat to quarters."

## Chapter 58

The first message they received was simply: *Outpost 56-B destroyed. Return to fleet immediately.*

Optimus looked at Megatron. “Sounds like we can take Halcyon now.”

Megatron nodded. “We’ll only have half an orn or so before they compensate.”

There was a moment of silence as they realized, together, that the next handful of weeks could end the war. It had gone on long enough that the concept seemed strange, oddly abrupt.

“Let’s go,” said Optimus, to break that silence.

The next information came from the newly captured Autobot prisoners. It wasn’t exactly information. It was the horrified reactions. They seemed to expect to be offlined immediately, cringed away from both AFF and Decepticons. But Optimus was too busy with the transfer of command to the local insurgent militia to take more than minor notice.

It was when they rendezvoused with the fleet that Optimus realized why.

There were debris several million kilometers outside the rocky planetoid’s original location. And no rocky planetoid. Optimus pressed a servo to the transparisteel and stared. Megatron leaned forward to peer over his helm.

“What did she *do*?” Optimus whispered. Most of those debris were slag on several faces; rich in silicates, the smaller bits resembled lumps of dirty glass. A lump of what had certainly been a wall drifted past, the signage still legible. *Medical On*, he read, and reset his vocalizer, looking up at Megatron.

“The planet,” he said, static fuzzing around the edges as he mis-synthesized the words in his shock. “Strika blew up the planet. The *entire* planet.”

Megatron said nothing, still looking out the window.

Optimus felt his optics drawn back to the viewport. He’d served briefly on 56-B as a cadet, a two-orn training session. The corridors came back to him in detail, even the odd stain by the door to the quarters he’d shared with Elita and Sentinel and Rodimus, the odd way the lights flickered because the generators weren’t always reliable.

“She must have had good reason,” said Megatron at last, but doubt crept over their bond, concern to mirror Optimus’s horror. “She would not do this without good reason. Perhaps she evacuated them first.”

“Primus, I hope so,” said Optimus. The thought gave him some relief. “Otherwise, this...this would be a war crime. There were civilians routinely assigned to this outpost. Technicians, specialists, medical personnel.”

Megatron simply nodded. Optimus glanced at him again. He knew the Decepticons had committed such crimes—Primus knew there’d been enough of them in this war, but they’d been almost entirely Autobot. They’d tried very hard to keep it that way.

There was something off with the mood of the ship when they stepped out of the shuttle. People were quiet. Or defiant. It didn’t seem to be split down faction lines. Optimus and Megatron shared a



look. “Where’s General Strika?” Optimus asked, and the Autobot who’d greeted them reset his vocalizer and said, “In a meeting with Jazz and Ratchet, sir.”

“Take us to them,” said Optimus.

They opened the door. There was no shouting, and the three officers looked up at them. Ratchet looked quietly outraged. Jazz’s faceplate was unreadable.

“What happened?” said Megatron.

Silence. It was Jazz who spoke first.

“The commander of Outpost 56-B captured Smokescreen and her team, and executed them.”

Optimus felt sick. “That’s a violation of galactic POW policies.”

“It is,” said Jazz. “The team included both AFF and Decepticons. We lost some of our best infiltrators.”

He looked across the table at Strika. “Given this, I support General Strika’s retaliation. I believe it necessary to discourage Autobot violation of POW policies in the future.”

“I know that following Sentinel around all that time gave you damn stupid ideas, Jazz,” snarled Ratchet, “but that doesn’t justify this, and doesn’t make it any less likely the Autobots own’t do this again! You wanted to retaliate to discourage repetition. Well, they’re not going to repeat this, they’ll *escalate* it!”

“What happened?” repeated Megatron, very calm.

“I led an attack that destroyed the outpost,” said Strika. “And the planet it was on. We swept the debris for survivors. There were none.”

The air went out of Optimus’s vents. “You’re joking.”

Strika’s optics blazed. “I am doing no such thing.”

“Did they attempt to surrender?”

A glance was exchanged between Strika and Jazz, one with volumes of subtext that Optimus definitely didn’t like. “You gave them the chance, didn’t you?”

Silence. Optimus’s spark sank.

“You killed an entire planet,” he said. The horror dried his intake. “Without giving them the chance to surrender. Without warning. You just...killed the planet.”

“Yes,” said Strika. “It was only an Autobot military base. No innocents there.”

“You didn’t give them a chance to surrender,” repeated Optimus.

“I suppose that if they had contacted me I would have allowed them to,” said Strika.

“The log says you destroyed their communications first,” said Megatron, examining a datapad he’d picked up from the table. Optimus looked at him. He didn’t seem much disturbed.

“How unfortunate,” said Strika. “I will endeavor not to do so next time.”

“You blew up the planet, from orbit—they never had a chance.” Optimus couldn’t believe what he was hearing. “The crew for that station was seven hundred. And there are always civilian personnel on a base that big, always medics and technicians!”

“They had more of a chance to fight than the prisoners they murdered,” snarled Strika. “They murdered them because we’re not sentient to them. We refuse. They murdered them because they thought no one would care, that they could get away with breaking the rules of war. I simply showed the Autobots what happens when the rules are broken. And I left them able to fight me. Those frames were in stasis cuffs!”

“You blew up the entire planet!”

“The debris will be a useful reminder.” Strika settled her plating back. “And I owed it to Smokescreen, not letting her offlining go unrevenge.”

“Do you know what this will mean for other POWs?”

“The Autobots don’t particularly respect the rules regarding POWs, now do they?” said Strika.

“It was completely disproportionate.”

“Then chew on this, Autobot,” snapped Strika, and for the first time it sounded like a curse. “*I don’t give a frag.*”

“Well *I do!*” Optimus slapped his servos down on the table and leaned in. “I thought better of *both* of you—Jazz, you were unspeakably *stupid!* You know Sentinel! You’ve worked with him, and you let your anger cloud your judgement! You just handed him the biggest victory imaginable on a silver fragging *platter*. You just turned the Decepticons into monsters again, and if it weren’t for the fact that *Prowl trusted you*, I’d question your loyalty.” Jazz reared back as if he’d been slapped, and Optimus turned his attention to Strika. “And as for you, I thought you were a better strategist. I thought you understood Autobot behavior better. After all, you’ve been fighting them for *how many* stellar cycles? You *know* that they’re going to escalate. Primus alone knows what they’ll do to the next poor sparks they take, and whatever that is, it’ll be because of this.” He took a vent, because the alternative was having his fans online out of sheer rage. “And I thought better of your consciences. Don’t give me ‘it’s war’ as an excuse. *It’s not.* You’ve spent so long telling me about the injustices the Autobots have perpetuated on you, showing us that you’re really the heroes here. And now you’ve turned around and done *this*. *This* is the horror that we online with. That you would come down out of the sky and murder us all with no regard for justice, no regard for innocents, that you killed for the pleasure of it and never forgot your grudges, always look for redress of your grievances, even from mecha who had nothing to do with them! What you have done is *monstrous*, and you’ve probably single-servoed undermined *any* support we’d have gotten from the malcontents on Cybertron! You *idiots!*”

He stopped. The room was completely silent.

“Jazz,” he said, more quietly, “I have no jurisdiction over General Strika, but I do over you. Because of this error in judgement, I am relieving you of your duties as head of AFF intelligence. Shockwave will take over all intelligence duties for both factions.” He looked at Megatron. “You will make the necessary arrangements?”

Megatron nodded.

“Good. Excuse me.” Keeping his back straight, he left the room. Only when he reached their quarters and was in the washracks with the door shut did he huddle down and shake with horror.

He couldn't believe it. He simply couldn't believe it, that this atrocity had been committed by two people he'd *trusted*, and he had trusted Jazz, whatever his motivations. Jazz's information had been good to this point, Jazz had never shown any behavior over the last several stellar cycles that might lead to his loyalties being doubted, he got on well with the Decepticons, he was kind to the Jettwins... They'd had every indication they could trust him, every last one possible, even watching him like a hawk, and now *this*. Jazz was first and foremost a spy. If he'd done this...

...but it wasn't just him, was it. It was also Strika, *who should have known better*. Certainly, she was a Decepticon, but she wasn't *stupid*. Why had she decided this was a good idea? He'd thought her too intelligent to think this was a good idea. Had she simply been so angry and grieved she hadn't considered this?

And this atrocity, because it *was* an atrocity, whatever the commander of that outpost had done to poor Smokescreen and her team, had been committed by his movement. He wanted them to be the good guys, to *stay* the good guys, but with one mistake, one operation commanded by an angry, grieving general, and all that was gone. For a moment, he hated himself for considering the strategic and publicity implications before the loss of lives, the fact that Strika had *murdered* 700 people, over 700 people, without giving them a chance to surrender, but mentally shook himself. Those implications could kill other people—like the next prisoners the Autobots took. They'd be lucky if they just got shot.

There was a tap at the washrack door. "May I enter?" asked Megatron. "I have fuel."

"Go ahead," said Optimus, morosely.

The door slid open. "I cannot relieve Strika of duty," said Megatron, kneeling and handing the cube to him. Apparently finding his mate in the washracks alone with the solvent off didn't disturb him overmuch. "I need her, and Slipstream is not ready to take her place. And...she would not understand. It would not stick. She still believes she did the right thing."

"It was a horrible and unspeakably stupid thing," said Optimus. He accepted the cube.

"Yes," said Megatron after a moment. "I now understand that, after your explanation. When we entered that room, I was prepared to support her; your analysis changed my mind. It was unspeakably stupid, and will result in unnecessarily lost sparks. I do not mourn the loss of life in the same way you do, however, and am glad that she offlined the commander responsible."

Optimus stared miserably into his fuel. "How could they?" he said aloud, not sure if he was talking about the commander or about Strika and Jazz.

"Easily," said Megatron. "To him, Decepticons are not sentient. We do not deserve rights. Anyone who wishes to join us is defective. Or they decided this had to be done so much that the lives of innocents were a reasonable price." He looked down. "When you are angry enough, it is an easy choice. I have made it myself, many times."

Optimus raised his helm. "I don't believe that," he said. "That kind of choice isn't easy. It can't be."

"You'll see, one day," said Megatron. "All of us have. We've all chosen differently at different times."

Optimus just looked at him.

"I too, have done monstrous things," said Megatron. "And often, they were not as stupid as this was. Often, it was the right thing to do for our Cause at the time."

“I will not believe that,” said Optimus. “If we are to make a better Cybertron, a better future, we *cannot* do this. No more operations of this sort, Megatron. Do you understand me?”

Megatron smiled at him, a bit sadly, and there was something odd in their bond. “I do,” he said. “And knowing what I do now, I might not make those same decisions.” He settled next to Optimus. After a moment, Optimus pressed up against him and leaned his helm back onto Megatron’s plating. Megatron tucked him into the crook of his arm.

“You will make a good Prime,” he said, quietly, and Optimus snorted.

“Stop that.”

“Never.”

## Chapter 59

“You did good, kid,” said Ratchet, patting Optimus on the shoulder. Poor kid still looked shocked and horrified. Ratchet felt that way. It was easy to forget what, exactly, Strika was, right up until she did something like this. And Jazz...

He'd been in the medical bay. He'd thought it was a routine operation, and was savoring the first few moments of relief that at least they finally had the personnel and equipment to adequately treat the casualties that an operation of this size would create.

And no casualties arrived.

None.

They could hear the ship's artillery firing, the deep rattling *thoom* under their stabilizers, but there was only occasional return fire. And no casualties. No casualties for a megacycle. Not even Autobot, once the firing stopped and the search team went out.

Ratchet got suspicious. He left the medbay in Ambulon, Nickel and First Aid's servos, and went to the shuttlebay.

He arrived in time to see the search team return, and he'd known something had gone very, very wrong immediately, because it was the Phase Sixers. No one in their right processor would send Phase Sixers on a rescue mission. He'd retreated, flung himself into alt, and gone after Strika.

She was wrong. He wouldn't make a good Decepticon. His tank turned over and knotted on itself. It was hard to square the Strika he knew with the thing she'd done. It didn't mean he cared about her any less...but he was horrified and hurt and didn't quite understand *how* he could still care for her after this. There was a large part of him that wanted to pretend this had never happened. There was a large part of him that just wanted to look the other way.

He couldn't. He was a medic. Medics didn't have that luxury.

He patted Optimus's shoulder again, in a distracted manner, and Optimus gave him a very wry look indeed.

“Thank you, Ratchet,” he said.

“Is Jazz—”

“He's been reassigned to Jetfire and Jetstorm's division, under Slipstream. They're teaching him a lot of maneuvers, and being surrounded by overly-helpful Seekers is going to keep him busy.” Optimus looked down. “Most of them support his decision. It's not split down faction lines at all. A lot of AFF lost friends in that raid too.” Optimus sighed heavily. “It doesn't justify the response.”

“It might do something for Alliance cohesion,” said Ratchet. “If that helps.”

“So should taking Halcyon, and I'd rather do that,” said Optimus. “Tactical meeting in two megacycles, by the way. I'd like you there.”

“Of course. Because I'm have such fun being your SIC, what with my medical duties on top of it. I thought it was only temporary, while we got this little rebellion off the ground.”

“I can trust you not to blow up planets when I leave for three days together.” Optimus’s intake twisted wryly. “If I thought you’d forgive me for it, I’d relieve you of medical duties and make you purely an officer. But I’d be worried about waking up missing important organs.”

“You would,” said Ratchet, absolutely sincere.

Optimus gave him that little wry not-exactly-a-smile again, and left the medbay. Ratchet sank his helm in his servos. Time to go back to healing, he thought, and pulled the datapad on cloning tissue back toward himself. There had to be a way to help Skywarp...

---

“The Halcyon Junction is open to us,” said Strika. She looked around the table at them. “We could end the war within the orn.”

“It’s their last junction besides Cybertron,” explained Bulkhead. “They can’t supercharge the Cybertron Junction; if they frag—er, mess up, they’d blow a crater big enough to drop Luna II down in the center of Iacon. Not even Sentinel’s *that* stupid.”

“Don’t count on that,” said Optimus.

“It’ll take them time to make the adjustments in any case,” said Bulkhead. “We destroy Halcyon, they’re stuck.”

“It’ll have to be destruction,” said Shockwave. “We can destroy it. But taking and holding it—that, we don’t have the resources for. That would entail a lot of prisoners. And the Autobot Central Fleet would make things difficult. I believe we could confront them in a major battle, but it would cost us considerably, and cripple our ability to take the war to Cybertron.”

“So we need to do something underhanded,” said Strika. “A small task force. Sneak in, place explosives around the generators, and detonate them as you get out. We need a good cover to get in. Suggestions?”

“Autobots escorting a prisoner might work,” said Shockwave. “It would be the most direct path to Cybertron, would it not? And the most secure? We can deploy a beacon that will send the first message about the prisoner’s capture well in advance, use an Autobot shuttle, and send smaller mecha with Autobrands as the ‘escort’. No one immediately recognizable, of course.”

“They’re not going to bridge just anybody,” said Optimus pointed out. He looked at everyone—most of them seemed politely interested, a few were thinking hard. “It’s a risk. For exactly this reason. They’d have capture someone important.”

“Not Strika,” said Megatron. “I need her here, and the idea of her being captured away from her command would raise questions. Shockwave, likewise, and you’re not a competent enough combatant.”

Shockwave inclined his helm. “You are indeed correct, my lord.”

“Slipstream isn’t infamous enough,” said Strika.

“I could,” said Ratchet.

“You wouldn’t be much help in a fight,” Megatron pointed out.

Optimus drew in a vent. “I could,” he said. “Sentinel would reprioritize everything if they got me, and everyone knows it. I can hold my own in a fight, and they’d certainly recognize me.”

“No,” said Megatron, instantly. “No. I am not sending you into his clutches. No. I will go.”

Stunned silence. Optimus stared at him, tank clenching, and Megatron met his optics and smiled, his usual smug smile. “I will, after all, be able to hold my own best in a fight, if it comes to that. What will the exit plan be?”

“Prisoner escape,” said Strika. “The fact you’re a flight frame will help with that; the spacebridge is in open space. You’ll get loose, the guards chase you, the shuttle comes in to save you, and the Decepticon fleet shows up to make sure you get back to safety at the last instant. We’ll have to be quick about that; the Central Fleet is based only two megacycles away. We don’t want them nipping our tails as we run.”

“I think it’s a damned stupid idea,” said Ratchet. “Not only is Megatron the leader of the Decepticons, not only is he bonded, but he’s bonded to the leader of the AFF and I, for one, would really prefer not to be dropped into command by both of our resident idiotic slagers offlining at the same time.”

“He does have a point,” said Shockwave. People looked at Optimus.

“There aren’t a lot of other people we could send,” he said, hating every word. “Is there an alternative? Could people disguise themselves as spacebridge technicians?”

Megatron gave him an exasperated look at ‘spacebridge technicians’, and pulsed amusement along their bond.

*Are you really so juvenile?* Optimus thought at him, and he got the message; his faceplate didn’t twitch, but his optics narrowed with amusement.

“Security’s too good. They’d want credentials and it would take too long to forge them.”

“And Halcyon may still come online,” said Strika. “Soon, too, if our sources are correct. We do not have time.”

“No more arguments. Strika, find my ‘captors’ as soon as you may.” Megatron rose. “In the meantime, I believe I am supposed to be terrifying some of our younger cadets.”

---

They were ready to go within two days. Optimus saw Megatron and the rest of the team off in the shuttlebay—a number of the young cadets Smokescreen had helped escape, plus two Decepticons who’d changed sides, Tailspin and Lightwing—hiding his unease. Megatron pretending to be a prisoner, stasis cuffs and all, was too close to some of his nightmares to be comfortable, and he’d only managed a wan smile the night before when Megatron had made a comment about perhaps using them in berth when he returned.

They’d both been wounded in combat. They’d both saved each other’s sparks, and they’d grown accustomed to working apart. It was just another mission, Optimus reminded himself, but the stasis

cuffs were different, and Megatron's backup, though the best of the AFF, still seemed very small around him, and the hiding places for the explosives too obvious.

"I can function without you fretting over me," said Megatron at last, and kissed him soundly, to the evident glee of his 'guards'. "A leader does not lead from the back, we both know this. Besides, I have some of your finest to protect me."

Optimus looked under Megatron's arm at the line of young bots. "Yeah, you do. Bring him back in one piece, would you? Make sure he doesn't try anything stupid."

There was laughter at that. "Yes sir! Should we make sure he polishes up and takes his supplements, too?" said one of the wits.

"Do," said Optimus. "He's bad about the graphite."

More laughter. Optimus looked back up at Megatron. Megatron cupped his helm in one servo, pressed another kiss to his nasal ridge, and stepped away.

As soon as the shuttle was out of the bay, he went to the bridge.

Megacycles passed. He paced, feeling the bond grow weaker with distance. Megatron mostly seemed to be amused at his concern, as far as he could tell.

Strika watched him with sympathy. "It gets easier after the first million stellar cycles," she said.

"Hmph," said Optimus, and kept pacing. Strika chuckled.

Two megacycles in, Strika ordered the ships to start toward the rendezvous coordinates. Optimus relaxed somewhat, feeling the engines come to life under them. At least they were going somewhere. He sat and fidgeted.

"You're worse than Terminus," said Strika, amused. "He didn't jitter as much...but we used to have to make up a berth by his station when Megatron was away on these missions."

"And how often was that?"

"All the time. Megatron used to throw himself into danger more often than not. Sometimes more than he should have."

Shift change came. Blurr came to take over the sensors, and Bulkhead came up as well. "In case they need to consult about spacebridge things," he said, but he sat close to Optimus and handed him a cube of energon, and chattered about Earth while they waited.

The waiting was broken by Blurr. "General Strika, Optimus, sir, there's movement in the Central Fleet I can't make it out at this distance but they might be headed to Halcyon."

"Onscreen," said Strika. Optimus swallowed hard. It was definite. The Central Fleet was moving, and by the pattern of movement, it was certainly to Halcyon.

"Frag," said Strika. "Comms. All ships. Increase speed thirty percent."

Optimus's grip tightened on the command chair. They couldn't warn Megatron and his team. Not yet. They'd blow their cover.

"Blurr. Autobot radio traffic?"



“Normal for fleet maneuvers, sir,” said Blurr. “Should we pull them out?”

“Uh,” said Bulkhead. “It might not have anything to do with us.” He looked around at all of them. “They could have gotten it online.”

“Frag,” said Strika. She looked at Optimus.

“Not yet,” said Optimus, hating the words, hating the uncertainty. “If they got it running, the entire alliance will be offlined. Not just a strike team.”

It was true, absolutely true, and he knew it as he said it, even knowing Megatron was on that strike team. He felt sick, but stayed where he was, trying not to show it.

Back to waiting. Optimus watched the ships move and focused on venting calmly, on projecting calm, feeling all optics on him. His servos wanted to shake; he clenched them over his knees and waited.

Cycles slipped by, half a megacycle, a full megacycle. They should have arrived; what was taking them? They should be getting a comm about now.

“Sirs,” said Blurr, “radio traffic around Halcyon just jumped 200%, focused around security sectors. The Autobot Central Fleet has increased speed considerably, still calculating magnitude—”

And the comm they were waiting for came through.

*“Discontinue extraction immediately!”* Megatron’s voice tore through the silent bridge, and Optimus leapt to his stabilizers. “We won’t leave you!”

*“The Central Fleet’s en route; they online the terminus,”* said Megatron. *“Security knows we’re here.”* Blasterfire came over the comms. *“We cannot leave, and the explosives are taking longer than anticipated. Do not risk the fleet, Strika, that is an order! Optimus, don’t do anything stupid.”*

“We will get you out!” snapped Optimus. “We’re closer than they are!”

*“It won’t matter. We’ll still be here,”* said Megatron. *“We cannot fail, Optimus. If we do, all of us will die. All the worlds we freed, they’ll be just a spacebridge away from Sentinel, all our fleets—we will lose. I will not allow that to happen.”*

Optimus managed a nod. He reset his vocalizer. Strika wasn’t there, she was doing something on the other side of the bridge, near the door. “Comms. Message to the fleet. Cut engines. Do not approach Halcyon.”

*“Thank you,”* said Megatron. *“Optimus, you must win this war.”*

“I will,” he said, and clung to what they had of the bond over all the distance. “I will. I swear it.”

*“Strika,”* said Megatron, his voice level, calm. *“I transfer command of the Decepticon military forces to you.”*

“No!” Strika lurched forward, her voice breaking on that word, and it was all Optimus could do not to repeat it. He offlined his vocalizer before he did. “No. Retreat, my lord! There’s still time!”

*“Not an option,”* said Megatron. *“With this operational, reclaiming Cybertron is impossible. We will succeed if we stay, and we must stay. Tailspin informs me we need another ten cycles to complete the sabotage. We cannot retreat!”*

He was right. He was right, and Optimus looked at Strika in silent agony, seeing his impotent rage and terror echoed on her faceplate.

“You won’t be able to get out of there, my lord,” she said, her vocalizer fuzzing static. “None of you.”

“No,” said Megatron. *“None of us.”*

Behind them, the bridge doors opened. Optimus didn’t turn to look, startled when Ratchet came into his field of view, First Aid with him, a gurney with them. Turned his attention away.

Another voice on the line, Tailspin. *“My lord, they’re here.”*

Metal grated as Megatron drew his sword. *“I will ensure you have time to complete your work, Tailspin. Strika?”*

“Optimus will survive,” said Strika. “Ratchet’s monitoring him. My lord...”

“No need,” said Megatron. *“You know how I hate maudlin displays. Win the war, General.”*  
Blasterfire, then Megatron’s voice, a roar. *“DECEPTICONS! RISE UP!”*

Optimus reached across the bond to Megatron, pushing aside his grief. Megatron welcomed him gratefully, drew him into the fierce doomed joy of it, and Optimus felt him laugh as they turned to face the oncoming enemy.

---

Strika knew it had gone wrong when the Central Fleet began to move. But Optimus was right; the possibility Halcyon had come online far outweighed the risks to the team, even if it did include Megatron.

And then the radio traffic jumped, and then Megatron’s longrange comm came through.

*“Discontinue extraction immediately!”*

Optimus lurched upright, optics wide, and Strika sent a fast ping to Ratchet. *It’s gone wrong.*

*Be right there, he sent back. If Optimus goes into burnout, keep him conscious as best you can. Use the jumpstarter; it should be by the door.*

Strika was already moving while Optimus protested. She found the jumpstarter, the clips. She’d never had to use it before. She glanced at Optimus, standing very still, optics overbright, his faceplate stricken as he gave the orders that would kill his bonded.

“Strika,” said Megatron over the comm, his voice level, calm. *“I transfer command of the Decepticon military forces to you.”*

“No!” The protest was automatic. “No. Retreat, my lord! There’s still time!”

“Not an option,” said Megatron. *“With this operational, reclaiming Cybertron is impossible. We will succeed if we stay, and we must stay. Tailspin informs me we need another ten cycles to complete the sabotage. We cannot retreat!”*

“You won’t be able to get out of there, my lord,” said Strika, her vocalizer fuzzing static. “None of you.”

“No,” said Megatron. *“None of us.”*

Another voice on the line, Tailspin. *“My lord, they’re here.”*

Metal grated as Megatron drew his sword. *“I will ensure you have time to complete your work, Tailspin. Strika?”*

“Optimus will survive,” said Strika. “Ratchet’s monitoring him. My lord...”

*“No need,”* said Megatron. *“You know how I hate maudlin displays. Win the war, General.”*  
Blasterfire, then Megatron’s voice, a roar. *“DECEPTICONS! RISE UP!”*

Strika pressed a servo hard over her optics, brought her helm up, and listened.

She owed him that much.

## Act V

### Act V

*Are you, are you*

*Coming to the tree*

*Where I told you to run, so we'd both be free*

*Strange things did happen here*

*No stranger would it be*

*If we met at midnight in the hanging tree.*

—*The Hanging Tree*, [Suzanne Collins, James Newton Howard.](#)

"Lord Megatron has been captured," said Optimus. It was a fight to keep his voice steady, even with the strange echo of the fleet-wide communications systems distorting it. "We know he is online. Further information than that is not available, not with any degree of accuracy.

"Our tactical situation is far more sure. The Halcyon Junction is no more; our attack on it was a success. In the wake of its destruction, the Autobots have abandoned the sector, retreating to Cybertron and its immediate adjoining planets. The Central Fleet remains undamaged; in the days to come, our success will hinge on our ability to disable or destroy it. Our strength, our determination, and our trust in one another will be sorely tested in the days and weeks to come, but we cannot falter now.

"It is vital that we take our advantage now, and press it, for the sake of the Decepticon Cause, and for Lord Megatron's. We will end this war, and make it clear that Lord Megatron's capture was the greatest mistake the Autobots could have made. Whether we are Autobot or Decepticon in origin, we are free Cybertronians, and the offenses committed on any one of us are offenses to all. The Autobots have ill-treated us long enough. We cannot allow Lord Megatron's name to be added to the lists of their victims."

He closed the channel and took his servo away from the controls, the energy going out of him as he did. He knew he'd sounded bold enough during his speech, but now he only felt small and tired and hurt. So, so tired.

He allowed himself less than a vent of that, then straightened his shoulders as Strika came up behind him. "Any news?"

"None," said Strika. "My agents are trying, but the Autobots are being careful. We don't even know if he's on Cybertron, and the only reason we know he's online is because you haven't keeled over yet."

Optimus ex-vented and offlined his optics. He could feel Megatron in his spark, but not clearly, none of the clear, sharp intelligence, none of the anger or determination. He was there, but hardly. "I think

they've drugged him," he said aloud. "He doesn't feel like himself."

Strika looked very grim indeed, and said nothing.

"I don't think he's in pain," Optimus added hastily. "I don't think he's distressed, either. He's just...not really there."

Strika stared at the ground. "I hope..."

"I know," said Optimus, and reached up to pat her servo. He felt sick at the very thought. Pharma might be offline, but Trepan was still out there. He at least harbored no illusion that Sentinel *wouldn't* use those methods on Megatron; neither, it was likely, did Strika. "Ratchet's research may help, though."

"I hope so," she said. They looked out at the fleet. "The reinforcements from Messantine should be arriving soon. They won't do much about the Central Fleet, but it'll help."

"Good," said Optimus. "The faster we can get there, the better a chance Megatron stands." He offlined his optics, reached for Megatron, what comfort he could manage. The thought of Megatron in Sentinel's servos terrified him. He tried to keep it hidden when he reached for Megatron's spark, but he knew Sentinel too well. Knew that he would have been enraged beyond belief to learn about the bond. And it would be all too like him to take out that rage on Megatron, especially a helpless Megatron.

They had to win.

---

The medical bay was solemn and distressing. Ratchet sat and looked at the Seekers, and ex-vented heavily. He hoped Megatron wouldn't be joining them, but that was probably overly optimistic. He offlined his optics.

No one else on that team had survived. The Autobots had broadcast the security footage of the raid as propaganda, and half the galaxy had seen the brutal summary executions of every other spark that had accompanied Megatron—and one of the Autobot guards as well, because Megatron had tried to tear his way free when he'd seen what they intended to do to his mecha. Ratchet had taken a bit more pleasure in watching Megatron take that guard apart than a good healer should have.

Optimus was holding up surprisingly well. Kid always did do better under pressure, but Ratchet couldn't imagine the agony of knowing a sparkmate was in Trepan or MRD's clutches. Rescuing Optimus had been bad enough.

The Decepticons seemed more cheerful than might be expected. They were angry, certainly, and there was a nervous energy that certainly wasn't entirely normal, but the prospect of winning the war to rescue Lord Megatron seemed to be one that most of them found highly attractive. To everyone who didn't actually know one of their victims, at least.

He didn't know what Trepan did, but there had to be a physiological component, a definite physiological component, to her activities. And if there was, maybe he could reverse it.

Maybe.

The question was, what if he couldn't?

Optimus seemed to be coming into his own as a leader. Again. He'd managed very well on Earth, but now, there was an extra confidence to the way he carried himself, and Ratchet certainly had not

missed the way the Decepticons were looking at him—with respect.

Maybe, just maybe, if Megatron were past the point of recovery when they rescued him, Optimus might be able to take his place. Maybe. Ratchet prayed it might be so, which was a terribly awkward position for an atheist to be in.

The alternative was Strika. He offlined his optics and ex-vented heavily. Even after the Halcyon disaster, that still hurt his spark. He still found it hard to believe, and he still cared for her, and he didn't know what to *do*. It would have been easier if he could simply dismiss her, treat her as not a friend, someone he could be properly distant from...but he couldn't. He was still as fond of her as he had been, and it made him angrier. And he could *understand* why she'd done it, which made everything far worse.

He curled over himself, and wished he could at least concentrate on work to distract him. Wished he could get out of his own way and go talk to Strika, or to Optimus, but he didn't want to worry Optimus any more, and what would he say to Strika that wouldn't make things worse? He knew her well enough to know that she must be miserable with guilt about this. He didn't want to make it worse, but he was still *angry*.

He forced himself upright. Might as well do the rounds again. Maybe it'd take his processor off things.

---

The drugs wore off sometime in the middle of the night cycle, and the growing awareness of Megatron's personality reasserting itself brought Optimus awake in the empty berth. He reached for Megatron, both inwardly and physically. His servo closed around the bedding, but his spark caught Megatron's and held onto it.

*Are you all right?* Over this distance it wasn't words, but the feeling of concern and query that translated. *Have they injured you in any way?*

Wry reassurance was his response, and he let out a vent of relief. Unhurt. Good. He wished he could ask something more direct, like *where are you*, but it was unlikely to translate.

*We're coming for you*, he thought instead. *Even if I have to conquer Cybertron itself, I will not leave you.*

Amusement and affection, and trust, as clear as if Megatron had actually said, *Of that I have no doubt*. He smiled, returning that affection.

They stayed like that for some time, and then alarm spiked through Megatron's frame. Optimus had a distinct feeling of being restrained, of a door opening, and then Megatron's side of the bond snapped shut, leaving a taste of fear/necessity/determination.

He sat up all that night, waiting for Megatron to return, but when his side of the bond relaxed again, it was into the drugged stupor.

"We're coming for you," he said out loud. "We won't leave you." And hauled himself out of berth and off to find Strika.

---

Strika staggered out of berth after very bad recharge, and found Optimus on the doorstep. "I think they're hurting him," he said. "Is there anything we can do immediately?"

He was an experienced enough commander to know better, she thought, but everyone lost their

helms when a consort was threatened. She ran a servo over her faceplate and huffed a vent, retreated into her quarters for the intelligence datapads. “Here,” she said. “Everything we have. I’ve been taking notes.”

“Thank you,” he said, and hurried away back to his quarters. She watched him go and sighed.

She knew the tactical situation intimately, and there was almost nothing they could do, save smash through the Autobot Central fleet and somehow retain the power to retake Cybertron itself. They couldn’t exactly rely on the goodwill of the populace, not after her own actions.

She stepped back, allowing the door to slide shut, and looked at the datapad she hadn’t given Optimus, but he’d probably be receiving the same field report as soon as he went onshift. He already knew it, most likely, through the bond, or suspected it.

Those public executions of the captured saboteurs, Megatron’s team, had already used her attack on 56-B as justification. She felt the guilt of those deaths already, and she snarled, low in her vocalizer. Whoever had decided that would be an appropriate retaliation would die, long and slow, and if she were leading the fleet, the Autobots would be facing unimaginable carnage until Megatron was returned. They thought one useless planetoid was bad? She would see how they did if she destroyed a colony world. Damned to taking the noble path! They were not worthy of an honorable war!

She reined her temper in. Optimus would not stand for that. Neither would the AFF, and that alliance was worth more than the relief of her rage.

The datapad on the workstation made that difficult, however. A general order to all Autobot personnel, intercepted by one of their intelligence officers in the fleet. *In light of the massacre at Autobot Outpost 56-B, all formal recognition of Decepticons and AFF members as enemy combatants is rescinded. Standard galactic POW policies will no longer apply to Decepticons or AFF members detained during military operations; officers are encouraged to use their own initiative in handling of detained individuals, within the reasonable limits of resource conservation. Exceptions: individuals requisitioned by the Magnus or Military Research Division.*

Own initiative. She knew too much of war to ignore the horrors those two words entailed. Under that, Autobots could use Decepticon prisoners as target practice. They probably would; it likely seemed an efficient way of disposing of prisoners and getting your own troops accustomed to killing, all with the same blaster charges. And it was the least of the horrors a commander could inflict under those orders. They could simply starve prisoners into stasis lock, if they wished, or torture them—though that would likely be under the guise of some pretty phrase like ‘enhanced interrogation’!—or use them for forced labor, or any petty act of cruelty an angry Autobot might imagine.

And Megatron was one of those prisoners. She offlined her optics and sat, wishing she could simply destroy a few more planets to demonstrate to the Autobots what happened when you broke the rules, that the price of it was too high. But Optimus was right; she couldn’t do that, not without taking an even greater risk with Megatron’s life. They had to win—and fast.

It wasn’t a good thought to recharge on. She was still awake at the beginning of the next onshift, when Optimus turned up at her door again, a single datapad in his servos.

“I think I have something,” he said. “Jazz, Blurr, Shockwave, Slipstream, and Ratchet are waiting for us in the conference room. They may have more information.”

“What is it?” asked Strika.

“The commander of the 3rd wing of the Central Fleet,” said Optimus. “One of our agents is on his

flagship. She uncovered evidence that he was a Decepticon defector early in the War—and that he's *very* nervous about being found out. Given the other conditions reported aboard Autobot ships, he has good reason. Any question of loyalty will get you several megacycles with an interrogator, at least, and the commander's records aren't exactly...innocent."

"Elaborate," said Strika. She tried to remember which report that had been. Somehow, it had escaped her notice that the mech in question was so high ranked, and mentally kicked herself. Too tired, too distressed—she knew better than to let it affect her so!

"It sounds like he was fairly high-profile," said Optimus. "And did some fairly unpleasant things in the name of the Decepticon Cause." He paused and looked up at her. "He's changed his designation since, but given the information the operative provided, I've managed to narrow the possible previous designations down to one. There aren't many field commanders who defected within that two-orn period, after all, and even fewer high-profile ones matching this one's frametype."

Strika paused, looking down at him.

"Tell me," he said, sounding as enthusiastic as a cadet presenting his first attack plan, "Does the name Deadlock ring any bells?"



## Chapter 61

“That slagger,” said Shockwave, dour as ever. Optimus looked at him in mild surprise.

“You knew him?”

“Knew *of* him,” said Shockwave. “Do you know how many high-security clearance codes have to be readjusted after a field-commander defects?”

“No?” hazarded Optimus.

“*All* of them,” said Shockwave. “Do you know how many other field-commanders,” his optic narrowed at Strika, “and *other high ranked officers* forget the new high-security clearance codes and get themselves locked out of everything?”

“That was once,” said Strika. “And Megatron did it too. So did Lugnut.”

“Exactly my point,” said Shockwave, primly, and looked back at the datapad. “Starscream behaved better than the three of you.” He looked at Optimus. “To be honest, that period was an extremely unstable one. It was roughly two orns before Megatron overthrew Megazarak, and the inciting factor for that was Deadlock’s command and three others being thrown into an extremely ill-advised assault on Luna I. The mortality rate was 80%; the 20% that returned were for the most part so gravely wounded that the medics could not effect repairs with the materials available to them, and those casualties were required by law to commit honorable suicide rather than burden the Cause with their repairs. Megatron spoke with Deadlock; Deadlock defected anyway, since he didn’t believe Megatron capable of overthrowing Megazarak. By the time Megatron assumed command, we believe that Deadlock had so thoroughly absorbed Autobot rhetoric that he was not about to return. We were, evidently, correct.” He looked around. “The suicide requirement...”

“Has been overturned,” said Ratchet. “We know that, and those of us who were around before the war knew it was an old holdover from the Cybertronian Imperial Army’s policies, and that Megazarak’s position as a general gave him very different ideas of what a true Cybertronian warrior ought to be than Megatron’s ideas, which were informed by actual Cybertronian frontliners. Like Deadlock.”

“Exactly. For all his strength and viciousness, Megazarak was at spark a noble,” said Strika. “He never much cared for any of the people under his command; Megatron, who *did*, was a welcome change.”

“So you think that this Deadlock—”

“He’s calling himself Drift now,” said Optimus.

Ratchet huffed an irritated vent. “So you think that this *Drift* will be encouraged to defect again because the alliance has a kinder, gentler commander?”

“Unlikely,” said Shockwave. “But his history...” He raised a datapad. “He was instrumental in the massacre at Uarya, as well as some of Megazarak’s more egregious little...retaliations. If Autobot High Command found out about this, he’d find himself commanding slag-haulers for the rest of his function. If he was lucky; it is more likely he’d simply be executed, or subjected to Trepan, to make sure of his loyalties.”

“How do we know he hasn’t been?”

“If he has, we can simply make sure this information becomes public,” said Shockwave. “The Autobots will lose one of their more competent commanders. He’s popular now, but if mecha found out...”

“High Command would have to make an example of him,” said Optimus. It didn’t feel right, ruining a mech’s function, but they *needed* Megatron, and if Drift cooperated, they might even be offering him a good escape from Sentinel’s paranoia. “All right. How should we contact him?”

“Shockwave, estimate of the importance of the operative?”

“She can be sacrificed, if necessary. She has no important information about us or other operatives that could compromise our intelligence branch. It would not be the desired outcome; we don’t have anyone else in that attack wing.”

“I could contact him,” said Blurr. He looked around at them. “What? We used to race in our offshifts, it’s not like I knew him super well or anything lots of mecha race all speedsters really it’s not like we *all* know each other but I happen to know him and I could contact him and get out fast if things went wrong and we wouldn’t have to sacrifice one of our deep cover operatives because really getting into the Central Fleet’s a pain, they’ve increased security dramatically to get in but if he thought I was a new one of their operatives he’d definitely talk to me and if I couldn’t get out I can wipe my drives, which any model not built specifically for intelligence work can’t.”

There was the usual silence after one of Blurr’s long speeches, as everyone replayed it at a quarter the speed.

“No,” said Shockwave at last. “I need Blurr elsewhere. Risking one of my best operatives for a minor operative is not logical. If Drift is amenable to our offer, I’ll assign Blurr as his handler. But I do not suggest using him for first contact.”

“Understood,” said Strika. “I leave the matter in your capable servos, Shockwave. Contact Drift and evaluate him. What are the advantages if he agrees to openly defect?”

“As Optimus noted, he is a popular mech. He might bring as much as a full quarter of the fleet with him. Additionally, he can sow confusion very effectively in the midst of a battle; if people loyal to him mutinied when we came into sensor range, for example...”

Strika’s optics narrowed in satisfaction. “Good. Give me a full evaluation by the end of the shift.”

Optimus smiled, as the meeting turned back to fleet business and larger strategy. He reached to his dim sense of Megatron’s spark. *We’re coming for you. Just hold on. You’re not forgotten.*

---

The conference room emptied, leaving Shockwave and Blurr alone. Blurr waited for the door to close, then whirled on Shockwave. “What the *frag* was that? I mean it’s nice you think I’m one of your best operatives but you fragging well know I’m not that important you know I’d make a better first contact than the one under cover what exactly do you think you’re doing one moment you throw me in a trash compactor now you’re trying to keep me safe by—”

A claw pressed delicately over his dermas, was withdrawn before he could react.

“I was not exaggerating when I said you were one of my best operatives,” said Shockwave. “You are, and always have been. I admire your competence, even if it nearly got me lobotomized.”

Blurr opened his intake. Blurr shut his intake. He could still feel the ghost of pressure on his dermas, a light tingle. It wasn't proper it wasn't professional but... but he didn't want Shockwave not to.

"The Autobots among us inform me that I ought to apologize for attempting to snuff your spark," said Shockwave. "This I cannot do with any hope of honesty. I was undercover on a hostile planet, and you would have exposed me, leading to capture, the certainty of the failure of Lord Megatron's plan, probable torture, and as it turned out, medical experimentation. The stakes were too high to do anything else. You, too, are an intelligence agent, and I presume you understand better than a medic might."

Blurr remembered those last moments of terror, the crushing agony, and looked away. "That doesn't answer my question why are you keeping me here you know that I'd manage the contact just fine?"

"Because I have my doubts as to the efficacy of this plan," said Shockwave. "I am putting together a backup plan, Intelligence only. After our two consecutive failures, I am suspicious we have a high-ranked security leak. I do not have any basis but suspicion, however, and this is purely a precautionary measure."

Blurr nodded. "Understood."

A pause.

"I still think you're a crankshaft."

"Mm," said Shockwave. "As long as it does not interfere with your duties."

Blurr could have cheerfully throttled him for that, but this time, restrained himself. There were more important things to do.

It had *nothing* to do with how much like Longarm Shockwave was while organizing a mission. He wasn't taken in by that kind of thing. He knew it had to be an act.

...Right?

---

"Contact with Drift went exactly to plan," said Shockwave, two days later. Ratchet frowned at him—Blurr was nowhere in sight, and Shockwave did not seem much perturbed by this. There was something fishy in this, as humans would say. "He said he would like to meet with Optimus, so he could have a better sense of our command—he already knows Strika. He said that he does not intend to serve under another Megazarak. It is risky, but I believe that it is worthwhile."

"I do too," said Optimus. "Where would he like to meet?"

"His ship is doing a routine patrol along the edge of the Autobot border. He's designated this moon," a small, dusty thing orbiting a gas giant much like the eighth planet in Earth's system, "as a preferred meeting spot. He's assured us that he should be able to slip away without anyone noting his absence. He says he'll come alone and that his ship won't be in scanner range."

"He's either very serious or this is a trap," said Strika. "I advise caution. Deadlock, I might trust, but who knows how he's changed over the stellar cycles."

"Understood," said Optimus. He frowned at the map, one servo over his intake, cupping the elbow in his other servo, an unusual position for him. By the way Strika looked at him, Ratchet rather suspected it was someone else's accustomed thinking posture.

Optimus made a thoughtful humming sound. Strika and Ratchet shared a look. Definitely Megatron. “We’ll do it,” he said at last. “I’ll take a detachment of frigates. If there’s the least hint of a trap, we’ll leave.”

“Our operative will keep an optic on things,” said Shockwave. “She is reliable.”

“Good. Any concerns?”

“Aside from the obvious?” said Strika, wry. “No. Ratchet and I will both be very angry if the two of you leave us in command of the rebellion on account of being offlined.”

“Your concern is noted,” said Optimus, and smiled a little. An odd expression crossed his face, so fast Ratchet almost missed it, a certain tightness, and then Optimus stood. “If that’s all, let’s be about it. Shockwave, tell Drift that we agree to his conditions... and that I much admired the action he fought at Clemency during the last Quintesson incursion, and look forward to meeting him.”

Shockwave canted his antennae. “Given his personality, I believe he may appreciate that.”

“The perks of being a history ‘bot,” said Optimus, and glanced at Strika. “Anything else?”

“No,” said Strika, rising. “Dismissed, everyone.”

Ratchet rose as well and followed Optimus and Strika. He needed to talk to them about Skywarp’s condition; the procedure he had in processor was on the hairy edge of ethical. Creating bits of processors had hardly been in the best ethical territory at any point in time, but it was the best he could think of just now.

Optimus...was dealing with things surprisingly well. He hadn’t lost his confidence, and that wry, biting sense of humor—something Ratchet had much appreciated on Earth—was still there. Ratchet wondered if Optimus was aware of what a good leader he’d grown into, then resolved never to tell him. He wouldn’t be pleased, he was sure.

The bridge doors swept open in front of them. Slipstream stepped away from the commander’s station, bowed to Strika, and saluted Optimus. “No change, sir,” she said, unclear whether she addressed Optimus or Strika; unlike Autobots, Decepticons tended to make use of only one honorific, one less thing to remember in battle.

“Thank you, Commander Slipstream,” said Strika. “Arrange a detachment of frigates to depart under Optimus’s command.”

“Yes, sir,” said Slipstream, and headed across the bridge to her accustomed station.

“I’m impressed by Drift’s cooperation,” said Optimus. “I hope Shockwave isn’t threatening him.”

“Deadlock was always a slave of his conscience,” said Strika. “I’m surprised he’s not defected sooner...though the fact Tarn has him down as a traitor to be executed probably has something to do with it. He will ask for a pardon, if he’s smart. Tell him I’ve granted it—I signed it this morning.”

Optimus nodded. Ratchet saw an odd shiver cross his plating and frowned. That wasn’t right.

Optimus’s optics widened, flared bright, and he doubled up between one step and the next, clutched at his chest with a servo. He gasped shallowly, servo going clawlike, drawing bright lines in his paint.

Screamed.

Ratchet was in motion before Optimus hit the floor, his body bowing in the grip of a vicious convulsion. The second shriek broke into static as preservation protocols offlined his vocalizer.

The bridge was silent, every bot's optics fixed on Optimus in horror. Most of them didn't know what this was.

Ratchet did. Strika, already at his side, did. It was not long after she had suffered the same.

Optimus's stabilizers drummed on the decking. His ventilations were shallow, uneven, ineffective—he'd already begun to overheat. His spark went wild wild, irregular spikes of energy disrupting its beat, strong enough Ratchet felt them on his faceplate. If that kept up, it would begin to gutter.

"Strika, hold him still," snapped Ratchet. "We need to regulate his spark." If Optimus kept bucking around like this, it would be too easy to put a servo wrong and cause worse damage. At least this one wasn't in the middle of a battle!

Strika pinned both kicking stabilizers with one massive servo, put the other on Optimus's shoulder. Ratchet slipped a cable into Optimus's primary medical port and dove into the coding himself, offlining the shock protocols as quickly as he could. The jolts of spark energy stabilized...

...and the spark itself suddenly dropped into near-burnout, the output signature almost undetectable. Ratchet swore viciously, applied the overrides to open Optimus's chest plating—slag to modesty and that they were in the middle of the bridge—and brought out his jumper cables.

The first shock had no effect. Ratchet swore again, applied another.

Increase in output, faded quickly.

The third shock brought it blazing back, a wild beat but regular. Ratchet watched, poised to deliver another, but the output levels slowly fell to acceptable levels.

"He's safe," he said to Strika. "He'll live. I hope." He looked down at Optimus's spark, opened a comm. "Gurney to the bridge, spark support, *now*."

"What happened?" said Slipstream.

Ratchet and Strika looked at each other across Optimus's still form, Ratchet feeling every ragged beat through his scanner, slowly growing more regular. That could be deceptive; output could always drop again. He wouldn't vent easy until that damn gurney and the spark support were here.

It was Strika who said at last, "Lord Megatron is dead."

"What do you mean?" Slipstream took a step forward, optics blazing. "Lord Megatron would never \_\_\_"

"Do I have to spell it out for you?" Ratchet demanded, or tried to; he felt too tired to put any real bite in it. "Optimus was sparkbonded to Megatron. That, that what you saw? Was a *classic* traumatic bond break. Which is medical terminology for 'his partner *died*'. There's no such thing as a *mistake* here, Slipstream. Megatron is dead. We know because we almost lost Optimus. Keep a watch on the newsfeeds. I'm sure they'll agree with me."

The doors slid open to admit Ambulon and First Aid at a dead run with a gurney between them, Nickel bringing up the rear with the spark support cart shoved ahead of her with one servo and a trauma kit under an elbow. They transferred Optimus quickly and professionally—Ratchet felt a grim justification in all the megacycles he'd drilled the entire staff, even the surgeons, on basic battlefield

evac procedures—and he hooked up the spark support himself, to be sure. He looked at the readings again, let out a long vent of relief. “Stable.”

“He’ll survive?” That was Strika, sounding brittle and shocked.

“He’ll survive,” said Ratchet. “If you need me, I’ll be in medbay.”

He looked down at Optimus again. *Yeah, he’ll survive*, he thought. *But I don’t think he’s going to thank me.*

## Chapter 62

Ratchet pressed a servo over his intake and watched the newscast. They'd executed Megatron and filmed it, because of course they had. No Decepticon could have the dignity of a private death.

Ratchet was a medic. He knew very well that few deaths were anywhere near dignified or noble. When your spark guttered, no matter who you were, Prime or dockworker, Magnus or footsoldier, you were a collection of cables and energon lines and failing mechanisms. Everyone convulsed. Everyone purged whatever was in their tank. Everyone's optics cracked and burst. Everyone made horrible noises as the surges of energy fried their vocalizer.

It was a good question whether the recording of Megatron's execution would inspire indignant rage in Decepticon sympathizers, or disgust that the feared Emperor of Destruction had perished in such a mundane, undignified way.

He watched the newscast anyway, trying to see where someone might have edited it, whether it really was a fatal blow. But it was real enough, Megatron's spark was even in the right spectra, and it was a real spark, computer simulations simply couldn't render sparks that well, and there was no disjunct in its beat and Megatron's reactions. Shockwave, who'd already subjected the recording to his own analysis, had come to the same conclusion Ratchet was coming to.

The footage was genuine.

As if they needed any further confirmation besides Optimus keeling over in burnout. The bond was broken. The only way a bond could be broken was the death of a partner.

Ratchet offlined his optics and groaned, very quietly, the steady beep of the spark support systems loud in the quiet medbay. Optimus was still unconscious, but his spark had grown significantly stronger over the last day. They'd be able to take him off the support in the next few megacycles.

And then what?

Watching Optimus return to the mech he had been before Sentinel's abuse had been wonderful. Ratchet hadn't realized the full extent of Optimus's injury until he'd begun to recover, and he knew damned well Megatron's affections had done a lot toward making that possible.

For most mecha, the loss of a sparkmate was a trauma that superseded all others. Even if their bonded's corpse wasn't paraded through the streets to the cheers of the citizenry, even if they still had a corpse to mourn—Megatron's had been melted down once that little performance was over.

They still had a war to fight. Would Optimus be able to lead?

Ratchet knew him well enough that his answer to that was yes. The question was, what would it do to him?

He looked down at the still frame next to him, Optimus's faceplate peaceful in deep recharge, and reached out to pat his servo. "Kid, I'm sorry," he said, and bowed his helm.

After a few megacycles, Bumblebee and Bulkhead came in to keep them company.

"They're saying we're gonna win," said Bumblebee, after a while. "The Decepticons. To revenge Megatron."

“Good,” said Ratchet.

Bulkhead very carefully put a huge servo on Ratchet’s shoulder. “We will win,” he said, a quiet rumble. “We still got Optimus. We’re not gonna let him down. And he’s tough. I mean, he’s already died once and gotten better! And he got us through Earth. Sentinel’s gonna be easy after that.”

“Disgusting crankcase,” said Bumblebee. “Blurr’s gone again, Shockwave’s acting worried. It’s weird.”

“And how would you know that?” asked Ratchet.

“Applied for an intelligence position,” said Bumblebee. “I *am* a speedster, after all. Might as well make use of it. If you hear weird noises, it’s probably someone practicing crawling around in the vents. They make you stick this organic felt stuff to yourself so you don’t make clanging noises while you do it. It is. SO. Gross.”

“Better you than me, kid,” said Ratchet.

“Makes two of us,” said Bulkhead.

---

Strika went to her quarters in a numb haze. It was some moments before she realized she didn’t need to be there, and went to Megatron’s quarters instead, unoccupied with Optimus still in the medical bay. She keyed in the entrance code—Megatron ought to have changed it more frequently, but he was bad about these things—and went to his console, accessing his personal files. It took her very little time to find the document dealing with events in the case of his demise.

She was the appointed successor to the leadership of the Decepticon Empire.

“Idiot,” she said aloud, and sat there, thinking hard. Strika was a name on intelligence reports. To do her work, she needed to stay there. And there was the matter of that destroyed Autobot outpost. She would make a poor figurehead indeed, and the possibility of peace, with a deeply grieved Optimus the only representation of Autobot interests, would be slim. They’d say she was manipulating him, that anything was possible from this new Decepticon Lord, the one who hadn’t given her enemies the chance to surrender, that one only had to look at the difference in their sizes to see where the power lay.

Guilt gripped her spark. If she hadn’t allowed her temper free reign, if she hadn’t destroyed that Primus damned outpost, they wouldn’t have had an excuse to execute Megatron. He would be online, and they might still have a chance to save him.

She would never make that mistake again, but it didn’t matter. The damage was done, and she *could not* be the new leader of the Decepticons.

Even if she were, and offlined, Slipstream wasn’t ready for the ensuing mess.

And she couldn’t waste her time inspiring the revolution. She was too busy running it.

She closed the document and went digging for its previous iterations. There. The one from three million stellar cycles ago. The one that left the Empire and his position to his bonded. Strika checked that the name Terminus was omitted—it was—and sent it out after changing the timestamp.

She deleted all the more recent wills, and made sure everything was in order, then leaned back and



sighed.

*I'm sorry, old friend, she thought, but this time, I know better.*

---

*He felt Sentinel's servo on his shoulder, the blade at his spark, looked up into the delighted smirk above him. Tried to look defiant and unimpressed, but it was hard. His spark cried out with rage at the stupidity of it all. He'd done so much, come so far, and here was an arrogant Autobot with an energy blade at his spark and there was no way out. He was going to offline alone and helpless in an Autobot prison with his intake clamped and servos bound and all he could do was glare, not even roar defiance, not even insult his enemy!*

*And Optimus.*

*Optimus would be devastated.*

*Optimus, who was planning a rescue at this very moment, Optimus who lived in fear of ever abandoning another under his protection, Optimus his loyal and beloved mate who still believed a rescue possible and had intended to conquer Cybertron for him, a good Decepticon response, his Prime! Optimus would never have a chance, because Sentinel's smallminded pettiness would end him before any attack could be launched.*

*It wasn't right that such pettiness could overcome Optimus's nobility. It wasn't right that he was going to offline like some organic foodstuff at the servos of something like Sentinel. Megazarak had been one thing, hideously evil and cruel, but not petty, not this selfish shortsighted bit of ambulatory slag. He'd faced hideous offlinings, torture, hacking, lobotomization, and this, this was stupid! He did not want to die like this. Helpless, at the servos of a bot who personified the word unworthy.*

*The preening scraplet leaned forward, his intake level with Megatron's audial. A low, smug chuckle. "You shouldn't have taken him from me. He'll always come back to me. Give him an orn without another bot to give him a backbone, and he'll come crawling back to be forgiven. How does it feel, knowing your death will end the Decepticons forever?"*

*He would have snarled defiance. He would have informed Sentinel that whatever was done to him, Optimus would avenge a thousandfold. That Optimus was a far greater warrior than anything Sentinel had ever encountered, that with his death, Sentinel was signing his own execution order. But the mouthclamp didn't even permit him that. Pain rippled through him, the injuries from the battle, the injuries gleefully inflicted by his guards on the flight to Cybertron. He was filthy, in pain, unable to move, and so, so cold, shivering with it and with hunger in convulsive shudders. And angry. This is not right! This is not a warrior's death!*

*He tensed as much as he could in the cuffs as the point of the energy blade touched the edge of his spark, clenched his jaw and tried to restrain the involuntary noise of pain. Sentinel stepped back, the glee lingering a moment on his faceplate before the recording crew arrived. Then it vanished, under the guise of formal command. "Are we ready?"*

*"Yes, Magnus."*

*"Very good."*

*He was alive.*

Optimus onlined his optics and stared at the infirmary ceiling in despair. There was no escaping the blankness, the silence, within his processor. His thoughts echoed loudly and without response.

Nothing.

Nothing to hold onto.

No one there.

He stared at the ceiling.

Silence. No one there.

Stasis cuffs, mouth clamp, couldn't scream. Chest plates open.

So cold.

So, so cold.

Sentinel smirking. Sentinel amused as he shivered.

Something touching spark. Couldn't move.

"Optimus?" Ratchet's voice, a touch on his shoulder.

So cold.

Stasis cuffs. Couldn't scream.

Cold.

Pain. Couldn't scream, Sentinel laughing—

Something seized him, shook him hard. Someone screaming at Optimus. Optimus ought to respond, he certainly couldn't, there was a clamp over his intake.

Something struck him hard across the faceplates, and he online'd his optics again and there was Ratchet, terrified, servos trembling and he could move, there were no stasis cuffs.

"Thank the Allspark," said Ratchet, and sat hard on the seat next to the berth.

Optimus turned his helm away. "Why didn't you let me go with him?" he said. His vocalizer hurt. Everything hurt.

Ratchet put a servo on his forearm. Optimus let him, and the warm weight was somehow a comfort. "We need you," he said. "Now more than ever."

He hurt. He was tired and hurt, and so alone, and felt so small and helpless. He stared at Ratchet. He distantly supposed that them needing him was a compliment, but right now it seemed like too much, and he was tired.

He offline'd his optics and fled back into recharge.

---

"How is he?" asked Strika. She looked down at the Lord of the Decepticons, feeling as if she'd never noticed how damned *small* he was until now.

"As well as can be expected, physically," said Ratchet. "Mentally, however..."

"I know," said Strika, and pulled up an appropriately sized chair to sit in. "But we need him. His

leadership will unify the alliance in a way nothing else could.”

“Yes, but...” Ratchet looked away. “I know he’ll lead,” he said more quietly. “I know he’ll do it well, because it’s Optimus, but what will it do to him? What was Megatron *thinking?*”

“Leaving positions of leadership to sparkmates is a longrunning Decepticon custom,” said Strika. “The mate still carries a fraction of the deceased’s spark, and if they’re competent enough for a Lord of the Decepticons to actually bond with, they need no more qualification. The Decepticons should accept him readily.”

“But he’s not a Decepticon.”

“He will be,” said Strika. “You know how we are about dying wishes.”

“Yes,” said Ratchet. He’d probably dealt with enough deaths to observe first hand how closely any mech’s deathbed requests were followed, how legally binding they were.

Oddly enough, she did not feel even a stir of compunction about her own actions. Honoring the dead was all very good, but Megatron’s final order to her had been to win the war. She was doing that. Regardless of his formal will.

She looked down at Optimus again, frail and tiny in the warframe-sized medical berth. He’d been damned well right, and she’d been wrong, and look where they were now. He’d need more protection, more care than Megatron had, he was gentler than was wise, but she still would follow him into Pit itself.

And likely would, given the defenses around Cybertron.

“How have the rest of the Decepticons taken it?” asked Ratchet.

“They quieted after they heard Optimus was succeeding Megatron,” said Strika. “Now? They’re making their approval known by getting very drunk. Someone, somewhere, has set up a new still, and Primus help me, I shall peel their plating when I find it.”

“And how are you holding up?”

She looked away from his sympathy and snorted. “As well as can be expected. Megatron’s order was to win the war. I’ll focus on that for now. Mourning can wait for when I’ve carried it out.”

Ratchet gave her a doubtful look.

“I’ll be fine,” said Strika, more harshly than she meant to, and left before she had to deal with his pity a moment longer.

---

Blurr got the recall order two days before he acknowledged it. Not out of necessity. He knew why; Megatron was already dead, (hard to miss that, what with the continuous newscasts) and Shockwave wouldn’t want an agent in the prison a moment longer than needed. Agents around here tended to vanish, first to be hacked, then executed and dismantled for parts. The sore-pressed Autobot armies were always hungry for parts.

But he had a lead. An important one.

He slithered along the vent, flat on his ventral plating, the revolting sensation of organic cloth against his plating lost beneath the data from his sensors, all tuned to their highest sensitivity. He was used to

the sensation in any case; Decepticon operatives often used it for just this situation, and while Blurr couldn't say he was a fan of the texture, it did mean he could move along more or less silently without the metal of his frame screeching or clanging on the metal of the vent with every movement.

There. His internal map pinged him, and he stopped. He put a padded servo down against the metal, pulled out a small drill, and went to work, bracing as much of his padded frame against the vent metal as he could, to keep it from acting as a sounding board.

There. He was through. He put the drill back in one of his compartments and put an optic to the tiny hole, clicking record on the device jacked into his visual feed.

Cell after rough, makeshift cell spread out below him, in which the small bright frames of Autobots huddled in recharge or simple boredom. Quick extrapolation hinted at somewhere near two or three thousand prisoners, just in this bay of this particular prison alone. There were another ten bays here.

Blurr grinned, and started the long slow slide back to safety.

He'd found where the political dissidents were being held.

## Chapter 63

The next time he woke, he felt strange and distant, but the hot urgent pain in his spark had cooled to something... something that let him ventilate, even if keening didn't seem to be enough for this kind of pain. Maybe crying, as humans did, would have been more of a relief. But there was no drifting confusion, no question about who he was, and he managed to stop himself before he reached for a spark that wasn't there.

Optimus online'd his optics.

"Hey, boss-bot," said Bulkhead, and reached to very carefully pat one of his servos. "Ratchet's dealing with some of the other patients. We had a few ships come back from a skirmish while you were out. Nothing to worry about."

"Which means we kicked their skidplates!" said Bumblebee, and Optimus somehow found the wherewithal to turn his helm to look at him. His entire frame ached.

"Ratch says to stay put," said Bulkhead. "No getting up or anything." He tilted his helm to one side. "He tells me I'm supposed to sit on you if you try."

But Optimus's attention was on the mech asleep in the chair next to Bumblebee. "Jazz..."

"He's okay," said Bumblebee. "He came in from maneuvers, wanted to spend some time here."

Optimus just looked at him, then turned his attention back to Bulkhead and Bumblebee.

"Tell me if there's anything you need, boss-bot," said Bulkhead.

"Not..." his vocalizer fuzzed static. "Not really," he managed. "Any news?"

They traded a significant look.

"What happened?"

"Nothing with the Autobots," said Bumblebee. "But since Megatron's not around anymore and all..." He trailed off, looking away.

"What happened?" asked Optimus again.

"Ratchet said not to stress him!" hissed Bulkhead.

"He's gonna find out anyway!"

Optimus supposed he should have been able to produce a snarky comment at that, but settled for giving them both a meaningful look.

"Megatron left the Decepticons to you," said Bumblebee quickly. Bulkhead groaned.

"Sorry," he said. "Ratchet told us not to tell you until you were back on your stabilizers."

"I would have found out anyway," said Optimus, his spark whirling in shock. *What were you thinking?* he wondered. *You knew I didn't understand the Decepticons well enough; why make me their commander? Strika would do far better!*

But Megatron had to have had his reasons. If that was what he'd decided, Optimus couldn't very well refuse. He just managed to keep himself from reaching for Megatron's spark for reassurance, and shifted his position to try and distract himself from the painful emptiness it brought back.

"Anything else I should know about?" he asked.

"Not really," said Bumblebee. "Arcee just started showing Earth movies in the rec room. The Decepticons love 'em, even though they complain about the squishies getting all the good roles. Last night was Avengers so if people start calling you Cap you know why."

Optimus, who'd missed most of the movie nights Sari had arranged, didn't know why but nodded anyway. "Anything that'll foster a better acceptance of organic species is good," he said.

Ratchet came around the corner, a datapad with a small cube balanced on it in his servos. "I heard voices. Is he online? Good. Optimus, drink this." He fiddled with the berth's settings, propping Optimus up so he could swallow properly, and handed him the cube. Optimus took the cube in both servos, trembling with the effort, aware that Ratchet was watching him. He managed a sip, making a face at the over-sweet taste of medical grade, and forced himself to take another swallow, rested it on his lap.

Being dead hadn't been this unpleasant, he thought.

"You told him, didn't you," said Ratchet to Bumblebee.

"Not my fault. He *asked*," said Bumblebee.

"Hmph." Ratchet stalked around the berth, smacked Jazz awake with the side of the datapad, and pretended great interest in Optimus's medical reasons when Jazz started upright with an indignant noise.

"Good to see you awake," said Jazz, after a moment.

"You too," said Optimus, and didn't quite manage a smile.

Jazz opened his intake. Shut it. Looked down, then back at Optimus, servos clenching in his lap. "I'm sorry," he said. "You were right."

Optimus didn't know what to say to him. It wasn't as if you could say *it's okay* or *apology accepted* to that, and almost everything else was too vindictive. He was too *tired* to deal with these social niceties. But he couldn't very well say nothing.

A memory of Megatron, concern in his optics, a gentle servo around his own. *We all have our regrets.*

"We all make mistakes," he said aloud. "We cannot allow them to rule us."

They were all staring at him. He didn't have the energy to worry about having done something wrong. "How are Slipstream and the Jettwins doing?"

Jazz, obviously relieved, started talking about the new maneuvers they were practicing, and the way the unit came together. Optimus listened, and was wondering whether he might be able to trust Jazz in a command position again when his exhaustion got the better of him. The last thing he remembered was Jazz describing a maneuver used by human night bombers during one of their planetary wars.

---

The next time he woke, it was to one of the orderlies offering him fuel. He accepted it, drank, and by the time he'd finished, the orderly had left. He wasn't supposed to fall asleep again, but they'd neglected to give him a datapad or any means to entertain himself. He was sorely tempted to disobey.

He hurt a little less, he supposed. Just a bit. But the exhaustion and weakness were still there. He wondered briefly how Strika had managed to be up on her stabilizers so quickly after Lugnut's death, then ignored it in favor of staring up at the ceiling.

Heavy steps around the corner, and Strika herself came into the room, pausing in the entrance as if she were asking for permission to enter. He nodded. She came in, stopped at the foot of his berth and looked at him.

"My lord," she said.

"I wondered if Bumblebee was making things up," he said, watching her faceplate.

It didn't change at all. "No," she said.

"I didn't realize Megatron had made such provisions."

"He had." She came around the side of the berth and settled in the chair there. "You carry part of his spark with you, always. When the pain fades somewhat, you will realize that." She glanced at him, and he had the distinct impression she would be smiling if she had a mouth. "It will become manageable. Not better, as such...but manageable."

They sat in silence a short time.

"Even before you bonded, you would have made a good commander. And I'm sure he knew that combining our forces under one commander was desirable, if we could not have the Prime and Protector dynamic. And I...am not suited to command. Not after my own actions."

He could not give her a gentle platitude. He just looked at her, not sure of what to say.

"There is one issue," she said. "To become our leader, you will need to be one of us."

Optimus raised a hand to his Autobot. "I won't give this up," he said. "I know that it means something very different to you, but what means for me is not something I can walk away from."

"I would not ask you to," said Strika. She touched his unmarked shoulder. "I was thinking here."

Optimus looked at that shoulder a long moment.

*Win the war*, Megatron had said.

And left him the command of the Decepticons.

This was bigger than him. This was bigger than his broken spark. This was about Cybertron, and Cybertron's future, and they needed a leader. Optimus wanted to curl up around himself and mourn for the rest of his function—but that wasn't what Megatron had needed. That wasn't what Megatron had asked of him, and he was not going to do him the discourtesy of ignoring his last request in order to grieve over him properly.

They needed a leader. They needed to win, and they needed someone who could be both Decepticon and Autobot, Cybertronian above all, and he was the only one in a position to be that.

Optimus let out a long ventilation. He could lead. Even if his frame was still too weak to let him walk, he would lead. He met Strika's optics, reset his vocalizer, and nodded. "How soon?"

---

Strika sat in her office in a thoughtful—and admiring—frame of processor. She'd seen the change in Optimus's faceplate, that moment of decision, and it had both lifted her spark and made it hurt. *Oh, old friend, you chose well. You would be so proud of him. Optimus will make such a leader.*

She'd been expecting trouble from the moment she'd sent the altered will out. Some people didn't know when to shut up and take orders, and four of them were invading her office.

Strika glared at the crowd in the doorway. "What is it, Tarn?"

"Lord Megatron is dead," purred Tarn. "And we have...concerns."

"Concerns," said Strika flatly.

"You see, we know he and Optimus were...involved." That was Overlord. Frag him, he could even make the word *involved* sound unspeakably filthy. Strika folded her servos in front of her and just stared at them.

"Sparkbonded, even," said Tarn. "And we have concerns about this. Optimus is not a Decepticon, and yet, if he was Lord Megatron's conjunx endura, he's entitled to step into Lord Megatron's place. This is not acceptable."

"Do go on," said Strika, optics narrowing. The mecha in the doorway shuffled into her office. Or, at least, Sixshot and Black Shadow shuffled. Tarn and Overlord traded a significant look and *strutted*. And if something had persuaded those two to make an alliance...

"Lord Megatron was a great leader," said Tarn, "as was Lord Megazarak before him. And even though both are dead, the Cause lives on, greater than any one mech, greater than any one leader, no matter how glorious."

"Get to the point, Tarn," said Strika.

"Optimus is not one of us. He still carries his Autobot badge with pride. He knows nothing of what we've suffered as a people. He is young, foolish. He delivered Lord Megatron and Shockwave into Autobot servos...and he also gave them Lugnut. I should think you, of all mecha, General, would understand my...misgivings. Our misgivings.

"Each of us standing before you gave himself over to the Decepticon Cause in an unmatched profound manner. More than merely our sparks, we gave everything, our struts, our lines, our cables, so that we might be remade into what the Cause needed of us. We became its weapons, swords in its servo. And in return, we understand it, understand its immutable nature, greater than any one mech, and we have no desire to see that Cause *tamed* by a little Autobot with no more claim to leadership than his abilities in berth. Optimus is not one of us. Optimus never *will* be one of us. He was online an oppressor, he will deactivate as one, no matter how many pretty platitudes he spouts to the rest of you. *He cannot change what he is*, and worse still, he has no intention of utterly renouncing it. He acknowledges wrongs, but will not acknowledge that the Autobots are in and of themselves wrong, will not acknowledge the implicit guilt that every Autobot carries. Even his movement carries the Autobot name."

"And your point?" said Strika.

"We will not tolerate his leadership," said Tarn, very quiet, and Strika's spark fluttered



uncomfortably. Alarm spiked through her systems. He'd been modulating his voice with her spark. She looked up at him and saw smug satisfaction in the optics behind the mask. He almost held her spark in the palm of his servo, and if his voice got much quieter, if he kept speaking much longer... "We will not tolerate anyone who condones his leadership."

She transmitted the killcode.

Tarn yelped, breaking the resonance. Then that yelp became a full-throated scream and he toppled over in front of her desk, thrashing. The other Phase Sixers took a step back, their optics wide, even Overlord's.

"And I will not tolerate dissension," said Strika, looking down at Tarn. Tarn whimpered and jerked again, then stopped moving. His optics flickered, and his labored ventilations sounded very loud in the very quiet office. "Anyone else have...reservations?" She met Overlord's optics and readied his killcode. *Just give me an excuse*, she thought. *One wrong flicker of an optic, that's it. Just one.*

He didn't, of course, and for now he was too useful to offline so carelessly. "Get out," she said.

"And him?" said Sixshot in a small voice, gesturing to Tarn. Strika looked over the workstation at him. His optics had flickered out, and his frame gone gray.

"Take him with you," said Strika. "He's a tripping hazard."

Only when they left did she allow herself to let out a long ventilation. Her servos shook minutely. That was far closer to offlining than she'd been in solar cycles.

For one thing, she needed to get out on the front more.

For another, it was a reminder that there were things she ought to be seeing about.

---

The last skirmish had left them better off than expected, and with an extra tiny useless star system. Ratchet had left the casualties to the rest of the medical staff, called in the other AFF officers, the ones who actually knew the difference between tactics and strategy, and let them discuss things until he had a better idea of what to tell Strika in the after-action meeting.

Then he went back to his office and stared at his datapads, wondering if Jazz would object being promoted into logistics on top of commanding Jetstorm and Jetfire's wing. After a while, he groaned and put his chin down on the desk, staring balefully at the wall.

The door cheeped. "Come in," he said.

Strika entered.

"Ratchet," she said, after making very sure the door was shut. He took his chin off the desk and frowned at her, "are you by any chance up for a quick frag?"

His vocalizer spat static. After a moment he realized his intake was open and closed it. He carefully reset his vocalizer, ventilated, counting to ten, reset the vocalizer again just in case and said, "What brought this on?"

She looked away. "I lost Lugnut and Smokescreen," she said. "And now Megatron. I am deeply fond of you, Ratchet, and would like to do something about it before either of us is offlined."

"I...I see," he said. "Sorry. It was...unexpected."

Her optics narrowed in amusement. “I know.”

He thought about it. Right here, right now, with Optimus still berthridden, looking back at them with distant grieved optics that were nothing like those of the mech Ratchet had known, with Megatron dead, 56-B seemed very long ago. Besides, he’d known she was a Decepticon. He’d known her servos weren’t exactly clean of energon. Being reminded of it wasn’t exactly something he could balk at. He still felt that ready affection, had felt it even in the aftermath of that massacre and felt badly for it, and right now...

“Yes,” he said, and felt a rush of both excitement and relief. “Yes. Definitely.”

“Oh. Good,” she said. “Is there anything in particular you like?”

“Being manhandled,” said Ratchet, who’d had enough of these conversations that *embarrassment* when applied to them was a meaningless collection of syllables. “Restrained. Rough fragging, and being...persuaded to obey.” He almost added his usual, *Though if that isn’t your thing I’m quite happy with just fragging up against a wall somewhere*, but her expression made it clear it was unnecessary.

“Valve or spike?”

“Valve. Here are the parameters.”

Her optics went very wide at that. “You’re joking.”

“Redesigned it myself,” he said, grinning stupidly. “I like big mecha.”

“So you do. Preferred safe word?”

---

A few minutes later found Ratchet bent over the berth, servos behind his back in a massive, strong grip, and a digit rubbing his panel. “Open,” purred Strika in his audial.

He managed a disdainful snort and wiggled. The tip of one of her claws scraped over the panel, a hot flare of pain. “That was not a request.”

“Make me.”

## Chapter 64

### Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“What about Drift?”

Ratchet looked up at Optimus, who was hobbling determinedly up and down the main ward of the infirmary with the aid of a cane. He’d paused across from the ward-supervisor’s workstation, where Ratchet was reviewing reports, with one servo against the wall and the other on the cane.

“What about Drift?” asked Ratchet.

“I’m supposed to meet with him, aren’t I?” said Optimus.

Ratchet stared at him. Then he huffed an exasperated vent. “I’ll get Strika down here, shall I?”

“Please do,” said Optimus, and turned and staggered purposefully back across the ward.

---

“It’s folly,” said Strika. “I was going to send Slipstream. Optimus is in no condition to defend himself if things go badly.”

Optimus glared at her, which wasn’t as effective with him flat on his back in a medical berth. “Drift agreed to meet with me. He’s not going to be happy with a replacement. I must go.”

“You’re three-quarters offline, *my lord*,” snapped Strika. “You stay right there, in that berth, and listen to Ratchet. We’re not risking you again.”

That glare turned into what even Ratchet would term an old-fashioned look. “Strika,” said Optimus, choosing each word with obvious care, “I believe you are my second in command, not the other way around.”

“And I can also pick you up by a stabilizer and bounce you on your helm, my lord,” said Strika, “and Lord Megatron would probably bless me for it, on this one! You are staying here, and that’s *final*.”

“I must meet with Drift, and I can walk,” said Optimus.

Strika threw up her servos. Ratchet started to wish he’d brought energon goodies. “Fine! I’ll meet with him! Will that appease you?”

“No,” said Optimus. “I will meet with Drift. Personally. As we agreed. Strika, we need him.”

“You are *not* leaving this infirmary!”

“Yes, I am, and I will be meeting with Drift, because that’s how we’re going to win this war.”

Strika looked at Ratchet for help.

“Good luck,” he said. “Notice how much I’m arguing? By the way, Optimus, I’ll be going with you.”

That got the kid’s attention, all right. Wide blue and red optics fixed on Ratchet, and Strika and Optimus said, in chorus, “No,” quickly followed by Strika’s “You’re a noncombatant,” and Optimus’s, “We can’t risk you.”

“Mmmhmmm,” said Ratchet, turning away. “If Optimus goes, I go.”

*See?* he sent to Strika, while Optimus was still sputtering. *That’s how you manage him. Round one to the medic.*

*What do you mean, round one?* she demanded.

*Oh, do you actually think we’ve won?*

“Fine,” said Optimus aloud. “Fine. I’ll take Nickel.”

“No, you’ll take me,” said Ratchet.

“She’s competent and not my second in command.”

“I’m not letting you out of my *sight*, kiddo.”

Optimus subsided, sputtering.

Later that night, he tried again. “Ratchet, you do realize how important this is?”

“You do realize how important your function is?”

Which was when Optimus gave up on arguing his way out of the berth, and tried to get Bumblebee and Bulkhead’s sympathies to sneak him to a shuttle. Ratchet figured out what was up and he and Strika met them at the entrance to the shuttlebay. Round two, to the medic and general.

Round three was a variation on round two, but Shockwave was the one who caught them before they got out of the medbay.

At that point, Strika and Ratchet looked at each other and gave up.

“I don’t remember Megatron being this much of a pain,” said Strika.

“Oh, this is all Optimus,” said Ratchet. “This is *normal* Optimus, the fragger. Though a bit less apologetic about it than I’m used to.”

Strika groaned. “What if we gave him a fleet and just...let him go deal with Drift?”

“I’m going too.”

Strika propped her chin on a servo and *glared* at him. “Really? Should I take the entire fleet too? The Autobots will notice.”

“Point,” said Ratchet, and huffed out an annoyed vent. “Tempting, though.”

They sat in silence for a time.

“He’s not wrong,” said Strika. “If we don’t play this right with Drift, we’ll lose his sympathies. If we

don't have Drift, we're looking at a much longer, bloodier war."

"Very true," said Ratchet. "So how far can we trust Drift? We've already lost one leader, we can't afford to lose Optimus too."

"Send him with our best frontliners?" said Strika.

They sat in silence a bit longer.

"I think that might work," said Ratchet. "Do we actually trust any of the Phase Sixers?"

"Sixshot and Black Shadow have had the fear of me put into them recently enough," said Strika. "Not Overlord. He's too damn stupid for the fear of me to have an effect."

"Blackout?"

"Definitely. Several of the Seekers too, I think. I'll give them orders to get Optimus out of there at the first sign of danger."

"Drift's not going to like the Phase Sixers. I think I'll be able to talk him down from it, though."

"You are *not* going."

Ratchet put his helm on one side and eyeballed her. He was well aware that as Decepticons went, his eyeballing was nowhere near the top ten—a number of mecha had him beat in terms of the sheer number of optics to eyeball with—but it still had the desired effect. She stopped looking determined and started looking suspicious. "What have you not told me, Ratchet?"

"Do you know *why* Drift stayed Autobot?" Ratchet asked.

"Your magnificent skills in berth?"

Ratchet's vents stalled. "Well, not *exactly*..."

Strika put her faceplate in her servos. "You're joking."

"I said not exactly! I persuaded him! Not entirely in berth!"

"Not *entirely*..." said Strika. Her shoulders shook.

"I patched him up when he first defected," said Ratchet. "Talked to him some. We got reassigned, and uh..."

"Primus, Unicron, and all their illegitimate sparklings. You *seduced* one of our best field commanders away from us. Did you stop at one? Why was I not informed that the greatest threat to Decepticon security is the powerful allure of Ratchet, medic extraordinaire?"

"Watch it, or I'll weld your vocalizer into your exhaust port. And *no*. Drift was half-offline when I got to him. We used a lot of resources getting him back to function, more than Megazarak's medics would have. He was surprised I bothered to save him. We ended up talking. A lot. It was six or seven orns after that we wound up in berth."

Strika grumbled. Evidently, she'd been utterly charmed by the mental image of Ratchet, Autobot siren.

"Hate to ruin your fun," Ratchet added. "But that's why I'll be going with Optimus. Don't worry,

it'll upset him more than it upsets you."

Another grumble. "I'll send you with a sizable escort, you know that."

"And I'd want nothing else," said Ratchet. "You know Optimus is going to be insufferable because of this?"

As it turned out, Optimus was in fact rarely insufferable, even when he got what he wanted despite losing every argument concerning it.

---

Optimus had to be all but carried to the meeting coordinates. Fortunately, Blackout managed this handily. He'd probably been specifically ordered by Strika to keep an optic on him, thought Optimus, and sighed heavily. Drift had already arrived—Optimus could see the shuttle—and he flushed hot. What would Drift think of a mech who had his subordinates carry him?

Blackout put him down carefully, then handed him the cane. "Thank you, Blackout. It's much appreciated," he said, and turned and went to Drift.

His frame wasn't very happy with the exertion, and he was sure he'd given Drift a very good idea of exactly why he'd been carried. The evaluating blue optics made him feel even clumsier, though he supposed he would have always felt clumsy around Drift.

He was big for an Autobot, slightly taller than Optimus himself, but small for a Decepticon. He was also a grounder, a grounder with a speedster type frame, one of the very old light courier models, from when all battles were fought in the air and grounders were exclusively support troops. He was quite slender, with broad shoulders and hips, his helm rising into two graceful points, one on each side, and heavy side-vents framed a narrow handsome face. The neat white plating was obviously recently painted, pristine, highlighted with little bands and flares of red in between the junctions and particularly around the tops of his hips.

All in all, he looked very Autobot. Optimus felt small and dingy in comparison, but extended a servo anyway. "Commander Drift. A pleasure."

Drift took the servo without hesitation; little wonder, with the strength of that grip, he could have rendered Optimus into scrap if he'd been given the smallest excuse. "Optimus. My sympathies for your loss."

Had that been a flash of fang among his dentae when he spoke? Optimus wasn't sure, but somehow that possibility lifted his spark. "Thank you. I realize the mission I originally intended to recruit you for is no longer viable. Now, I simply want to ask your help in ending this war."

"I have one question," said Drift. "That is all."

Optimus squared his shoulders, trying not to overbalance. "I will answer to the best of my abilities."

"Why do you lead the Decepticons?"

The answer came immediately to his glossa. *Megatron. Megatron died alone and helpless at Sentinel's servos and I don't want that to happen to anyone else ever again. And he told me to win the war.*

But he thought of Lugnut, and Smokescreen, and the shuttle explosion, and that recording of that long-ago protest, and the clones in the medbay, and said instead, "I have a lot of reasons. And I want to make sure that what happened to them never happens to anyone ever again." He hesitated. "And I want us to all be Cybertronian, not only Decepticons or Autobots."

Drift watched him, evaluating. "I see." His optics focused on something behind Optimus. "Ratchet."

"Hello, Drift," said Ratchet. "Are you planning on talking to him for much longer? If so, I'm going to have to call for a chair. He shouldn't be standing for too much time, not yet."

"I have all the information I need," said Drift. "My question has been answered... and the battle Optimus chose to praise me for was most illuminating."

"Clemency," said Optimus, and managed a small smile. Drift had lost Clemency...but saved nine thousand, seven hundred and eighty two Autobot lives that would have been lost if he had pushed the attack on a strategically useless world. "It's not about the victor..."

"...but the sparks you can save," said Drift. "What do you need me to do, Lord Optimus?"

---

Optimus figured out the specifics of what he needed Drift to do while he was still confined to the infirmary. He spent megacycles working with Strika to craft the attack on Cybertron, made possible by the defection of or at least temporary confusion in Drift's squadron. The intelligence reports Blurr brought were promising indeed; it seemed quite possible that Drift might indeed carry the majority of his command with him when he did defect. But they weren't about to bet on it.

By the time they drew up the secondary plan, the one in case Drift betrayed them, he was up and about for much longer periods of time, sometimes even forgetting his cane. By the time they finalized the whole thing and began issuing orders to field commanders, he was out of medbay and standing on his own stabilizers.

Walking back into their shared quarters was the hardest thing he'd ever done. Reminders of Megatron were everywhere, small clawmarks on the berth, scuffs at a certain height on the washrack doors where he kept bumping his shoulder, even the berth padding, colors he'd favored. Optimus stood there in the door, the grief washing over him again, and then, strangely, a sort of comfort. He went to the berth and sat, touching the cloths on it.

It smelled of him. Cybertronians didn't generate scents as organics did, but there was a tang to the scent of Megatron's systems that there was to no one else's, and when Optimus curled up among the cloths he felt a relief, like Megatron was, somehow, still there. Was this why people believed in Allspark ghosts? Lying here, he could almost imagine they were real.

He'd expected this to be painful. He expected it to only serve as a reminder that Megatron was dead.

It didn't. Oh, he hurt, he still hurt, he would *always* hurt, but it was a reminder. He had something to finish before grieving. He had a duty to Megatron, and as long as he fulfilled that duty, grief was secondary, and this was a comfort. It was as if Megatron were still with him.

On impulse he reached for the drawer by the berth and pulled out the little hologram within it. He had no such depiction of Megatron. He wished he did, but this was as close as he could get.

“I wish I could talk to you,” he said to Terminus’s eternal smile, tucking his stabilizers up. “About him. What he was like, with you. I’ll receive my brand tomorrow. I think...I think that would have pleased him.” He sighed and looked away. “I guess...”

He sat there for a long time, and suddenly all the grief boiled up, shocking in its abruptness. That moment of comfort was gone.

“Take care of him for me,” he managed at last, drew a sobbing vent full of static. “I... I have things to do, before then. Just please take care of him.”

---

He felt grim and distant and hollow the next morning, walking into the cleared mess hall, crowded with everyone who was off duty, with cameras broadcasting the ceremony to the rest of the fleet. Strika stood at the head of the hall, a metalmesh cloak that had certainly known better days draped around her shoulders. Ratchet stood unobtrusively off to the side, out of the pickup of the cameras. Another precaution, though he’d certified Optimus well enough to undergo the ceremony—not without grumbling about barbarism.

The crowd parted before him to let him walk up to Strika, and in accordance with the recordings he’d seen of this ceremony, he began to kneel, as any new convert ought to. She’d at least assured him he wouldn’t have to swear the traditional oath, promising his determination to create a Decepticon-controlled Cybertron, and he only hoped that he’d be able to repeat whatever she said competently. He felt slow and tired this morning, and didn’t want to count on it.

Strika looked down at him, her optics tilting in a private smile for him alone, the branding iron in one servo.

“There is no need to kneel,” she said, and Optimus stopped himself in mid-gesture, straightened up. Strika raised her voice. “There are no oaths to take,” she said. “We believe in deeds, not words. Optimus has proven himself many times over, to us, and to Lord Megatron. He is a Decepticon in spark. He has requested to become one in frame as well.” Her attention turned back to him. “Will you accept that which Lord Megatron saw fit to entrust you with, the leadership of the Decepticon people? Do you take their sparks as your spark, their pain as your pain, their hope as your hope? Do you pledge your spark to them, as theirs, from now until the end of your function?”

“Yes,” said Optimus, forced himself not to look at the glowing iron in Strika’s servo. Branding was intensely painful, and he would have to bear it without restraint. He hoped he wouldn’t fall. “Yes, I do. For now, until the end of my function.”

Strika pressed the sigil to his upper arm in a swift, almost merciful gesture, holding him up with her other servo. Optimus bit the inside of his intake until he tasted energon, venting hard. He forcibly shut down his vocalizer before the cry escaped, didn’t prevent the static that tore from him.

He bowed his helm and focused on venting. Gradually, the pain settled into something other than hot urgent agony, and he found himself still standing. He met Strika’s optics—was that a hint of pride?—and offlined his optics briefly as his tanks rolled and the world lurched.

Purging was not an option. Offlining was not an option. Optimus mastered himself, and forced himself to turn to look at everyone.

On the shoulder opposite his Autobrand, a new Decepticon insignia glistened, purple and bright.



Strika came up behind him, settled a heavy cloak over his shoulders and fastened it, taking great care not to let the metalmesh brush the new brand.

“All hail Lord Optimus,” she said. “Lord Optimus, Emperor of Destruction, Lord of the Decepticons, Supreme Commander of the Autobot Freedom Faction. Decepticons, rise up!”

“DECEPTICONS, RISE UP!” echoed thousands of voices, and they cheered. Optimus looked around, at all the joyful faceplates, all the red optics, and wondered at seeing such hope in them.

## Chapter End Notes

Hi all! I'm very tentatively puttering around on Tumblr again, if you want to drop by and say hi! (I'm mllemusketeer on there, for those who don't know!)

## Chapter 65

“You disobeyed orders.”

“I got results.” Blurr rolled his optics. “Strategically significant ones.”

“You *disobeyed my direct orders.*”

“I *got results*, Primus, what is *wrong* with you?”

That actually got an exasperated sigh out of Shockwave. “I never used to have this much trouble with you on Cybertron. What happened to the professional, efficient officer under my command?”

“You threw him in a trash compactor,” snapped Blurr. “Oh, and you were spying for the Decepticons. And you threw me in a trash compactor.”

“Requirements of the service...” started Shockwave.

“And you’d been lying to me the whole time,” said Blurr.

“I was doing my duty.”

“Yeah, and so was I! I was maintaining a professional relationship which was hard as *Pit* sometimes, frag you, and you were...you were a Decepticon spy the whole time! I spent the entire war spying for a *Decepticon.*”

“A professional relationship?” said Shockwave.

“Forget it, all right?”

“Why was maintaining a professional relationship with Longarm Prime so difficult?” Shockwave sounded completely confused.

“Just forget about it oh look at the time I need to be in a meeting with General Strika and Lord Optimus...”

“You do not,” said Shockwave. “That is not for another two megacycles. Do not lie to the bot who organizes your schedule.”

“You are *disgusting!*”

“Perhaps. But I would like to know why one of my best agents has become completely unprofessional and outright *sloppy* in the execution of his duties.”

“I am *not* sloppy.”

“The difficulty of maintaining a proper professional relationship with my Longarm persona. Please elaborate.”

It was too much. Blurr’s strained temper snapped. “Did you actually jettison your emotional core, you idiotic scraplet-infested battledrone? What do you *think* made it difficult?”

Shockwave’s optic shuttered. His antennae twitched.

Silence. One vent.

Two.

“And then you threw me in a trash compactor,” said Blurr.

“Oh,” said Shockwave. “Now I understand why that had such a deleterious effect on our relationship.”

“No slag,” snapped Blurr, looking away.

“Are you still interested?”

“What?”

“Are you still interested in me? I would not be opposed to pursuing a relationship.”

“It wouldn’t be professional.”

“It would not, but if it would improve the efficiency with which you performed your duties, I would have no objection.”

Blurr slapped him.

“Oh,” he said again. “I see. Cultural disjunct. I should rephrase that. I would enjoy a relationship with you, and we could justify it with the claim of efficiency.”

“I’m not interested,” said Blurr. He knew it was a lie the instant it left his glossa, and Shockwave’s antennae canted forward in interest. He folded his arms. “I’d have to leave Intelligence,” he said. He looked away. “I’m sure it wouldn’t work anyway it wouldn’t be worth it it’d be stupid.”

“Decepticon fraternization policies are very different from Autobot,” said Shockwave.

Blurr couldn’t look at him. “I’d be doing it because I wanted Longarm, not you.”

Shockwave was silent a long moment. Then he transformed.

“I know that’s a lie,” said Blurr, not looking at him.

“I know,” said Shockwave, behind Longarm’s face. “But would it be easier for you if I took on this form when you reported to me?”

“I guess so,” said Blurr, and actually looked at him.

He wasn’t sure how they ended up kissing. They both moved at once, and there was hot plating under his servos and Shockwave was really bad at kissing, really really bad but it didn’t matter, he leaned up and deepened it.

The conference table knocked against the backs of his legs, and Shockwave lifted him onto it. This was going fast this was going really fast maybe too fast—but he liked fast. Fast was good. He spread his legs, rubbing his panel over Shockwave’s. He’d waited long enough, been professional long enough.

“I wanted this for ages and then you wound up being a Decepticon and killing me,” he said, as Shockwave ran a hand over his aft. “Well almost killing me but it felt like killing me and I could hardly believe it because I didn’t want it to be true at all I only knew Wasp wasn’t the traitor and—

ah!”

A finger dipped into him and rubbed. “And I don’t care I’m done caring oh that’s good more it’s about time—aah!—about time I told you I’ll have to get used to you as Shockwave sooner or later and—”

Shockwave kissed him again, and was significantly better at it. “Enough of that,” he said when they parted. “Just enjoy yourself.”

“Yes sir,” said Blurr.

---

The brand was something of a comfort.

Whatever else Ratchet might grumble about branding, to Optimus it now made sense. It wasn’t mere words that made him a Decepticon now. It was his frame, the pain he’d chosen to endure to prove his devotion. He looked down at the brand, and smiled to himself. Autobot badges came off; that was something of the point. If you were not enough of an Autobot, you lost your badge.

If you failed the Decepticons, you lost your function, because being a Decepticon was so central to who you were that if you failed them, you might as well be offline.

He couldn’t say he thought it was the *best* system, but it had a certain cold comfort. He’d taken the brand, and it was now part of him. He wouldn’t be fully Decepticon, but he was Decepticon, without doubt, and the fading ache of the brand was a reminder of that.

Megatron would be proud.

The ache also meant that. He’d accepted the duty Megatron had given him with all his spark. He would carry his commitment to that all his days. He would always wear something that was absolutely Megatron’s.

He didn’t dare tell Ratchet this, but Strika noticed him sneaking proud glances at the new brand and his old badge interchangeably and chuckled.

“I know,” she said. “I was like that too, after receiving my brand. You wear it well.”

“Thank you,” he said. He glanced up as Blackout passed them, murmuring a respectful, “Lord Optimus.”

“I’m never going to get used to that,” he said.

“We are warframes. We like having a distinct person to follow. We like reminding ourselves of that, one way or another.”

“I suppose so,” said Optimus. “Still, it’s weird. To me, at least.”

“They find it weird to have to look down to find their lord and master,” said Strika cheerfully. “Our leaders usually run big. The right of challenge tends to select for that.”

Optimus made a face.

“I know,” said Strika, teasing. “Barbaric. But it keeps a sort of equality, if any Decepticon can challenge their lord, should their lord lead badly. It makes following a choice.”

“Hadn’t thought of it like that,” said Optimus. He handed her the datapad with the plan for the attack on Cybertron. “Did you have time to look this over?”

“Yes. I like what you’ve done with the heavy armament,” said Strika, as they rounded the corner heading to the conference room. Optimus nodded, and gestured to an image on the map they were consulting.

“That,” he said. “That’s the location of the primary space station defending Cybertron. We’ll need the dreadnoughts to punch through. Primus, I hope we don’t have to use this. Better if Drift stays with us.”

“Certainly,” said Strika. “I am impressed with how you won him over, by the way. It was not entirely expected.”

“Glad I could still surprise you,” said Optimus.

“In other news,” she handed him a different datapad, and he had to juggle them for a moment, “we’ve caught Swindle up to his old tricks. He’s been doing business with the Autobots, behind a dummy organization. He carries a Decepticon badge; this is strictly prohibited. Should I send the DJD after him?”

“Who’s leading the DJD right now?”

“Overlord.”

“Oh frag. No, don’t do that. I’d rather just arrest him and throw him in the brig.”

“As the Lord of the Decepticons commands.”

Optimus frowned at her. She gave him a look of patent innocence, and keyed in the code to open the conference room door.

They both froze.

*Soundproofing*, thought Optimus, *has its disadvantages*.

Shockwave and Blurr hadn’t noticed them. This was not entirely unsurprising. They looked *very* occupied.

Strika was the first one to react. She took a step backward. Optimus hastily followed her, and the door slid shut again.

They looked at each other.

“Shall we use the observation deck?” said Strika.

“Yes,” said Optimus, then, “I understand that Decepticon fraternization policies are somewhat more lax than Autobot ones, but that seems to be a disaster in the making.” He was surprised his voice was so steady.

“It’s been a disaster in the making for some time,” said Strika. “I’ll see about transferring Blurr, though Primus knows to what. He’s one of the best agents we have.”

“Put him under your direct command,” suggested Optimus. “And then consult Shockwave on the technicalities.” He tried to step firmly on the part of his processor that was gibbering about how holy slag, they were right about the flexibility of intelligence mecha. Blurr was his subordinate; it wasn’t appropriate. “At least this might mean they’ll stop screaming at each other in the corridors.”

“Don’t count on it,” said Strika.

“And perhaps we should dissuade them from using the conference room.”

“No need to be drastic. The conference table has a long, proud tradition.”

Optimus scrutinized her faceplate, trying to see if she was joking. “What?”

Her optics narrowed in amusement. “It’s a large, sturdy table. Of course it does. At a convenient height, too. People usually keep to the schedule, and the command staff are the only ones who have access.”

“I did not need to know that.”

“Occasionally there are surprises. About time Shockwave got his own back; Primus knows he ran into Lugnut and myself enough.”

Silence again.

“Does it get any better?” asked Optimus.

“I’m not sure,” said Strika. “It hurts, but there are things that need to be done, and while you’re getting them done, you go on living and you get used to dealing with it.” She looked away. “I still think of him every day, and I am still missing something. But I still function.”

Optimus put a careful servo on her arm. “Thank you,” he said, unsure of what he was thanking her for. “We’ll win this war. For them.”

“For them,” said Strika. “Now, about the supply lines...”

---

Several megacycles later, Strika stood on the bridge with Slipstream, going over the training reports of her Seekers. They were doing very well, surprisingly so since they included several Autobots who’d been onlined grounders. One thing she would say of Optimus’s people: they were adaptable.

And Slipstream was a very good commander. Strika looked down at her, still explaining the difficulties Jetfire and Jetstorm were experiencing flying with other Seekers for the first time, and narrowed her optics in satisfaction.

“Sir,” said the mech at sensors, “there’s an incoming unidentified shuttle.”

“Comms, given them the standard greeting.” Strika looked up at the screen. “It’s been a while since we had a new defector. Let’s make sure they’re actually defecting.”

“Unidentified shuttle, this is Decepticon warship *Conquest*. Please decelerate to seven thousand mechanometers and hold position. State name, affiliation, and port of origin, then stand by to verbally deactivate your self-destruct mechanisms.”

“I’d say it’s a Decepticon shuttle,” said Slipstream. “Old, too. Didn’t we stop using the external laser cannon by the second millennium of the last war?”

“Good optic,” said Strika, folding her servos over her chestplate. “Yes. That’s one of ours. Or used to be.”

“Unidentified shuttle, this is *Conquest*, please acknowledge. Failure to comply will be met with deadly force.”

Over the channel to the shuttle, someone chuckled.

Every plate on Strika’s frame stood to attention with absolute shock and burgeoning terror.

*“And what happened to the dear old Nemesis?”* the shuttle’s occupant said. *“Was Megatron really so bad at maintaining my toys?”*

“Unidentified shuttle, state name, affiliation, port of origin, and deactivate your self-destruct systems. This is your last warning.”

*“You’re a new one,”* said that voice. *“I am Megazarak. I am Decepticon. And I will speak with your commanding officer.”*

“This is General Strika.” Her spark was pounding, her servos wanted to tremble. Outrage rose in her intake. Megatron was dead, and this fragger was still online. “What do you want, Megazarak? Give me one reason not to blow you to atoms.”

*“I claim the right of challenge,”* said Megazarak. *“By all the rules you hold so dear, General, I am granted immunity until challenge is completed.”*

Strika looked at Slipstream, gestured at the commsmech, a small awkward truck with a knack for generating forcefields named Trailbreaker. He muted the feed.

“We could kill him,” said Slipstream. “No one has to know.”

Trailbreaker reset his vocalizer. “General, he transmitted that last part on a broad frequency. Everyone heard it. Everyone knows.”

“Frag!” Her intake closed in something very close to panic. Not him. Not him again, they wouldn’t survive, none of them would, not her, not Slipstream, not the Autobots. Frag, he’d probably appoint Overlord as SIC. They were dead. The stakes were too high to let him succeed...but he’d already succeeded. If she killed him there, she’d destroy Optimus’s right to rule, and everyone would know it, and the Decepticons would come apart under her. And if she didn’t, he’d take them apart himself. Frag! He wasn’t even a Decepticon; Megatron had cast him out. But few people knew that. Outside of the people on the bridge that day, people thought Megazarak dead.

“So we’ll have to accept?”

“There’s no accepting involved. He’s claimed it, it’s his, there’s nothing we can do for it.” She hated every word. “I’ll inform Optimus.”

## Chapter 66

“The right of challenge is older than the Cause itself. It is open to any Decepticon who wishes it—and yes, Megazarak’s not a Decepticon but no one knows that. They thought he died at Megatron’s servos. You’ll sound cowardly if you deny him challenge on those grounds, and that’ll cause even more trouble.” Strika sounded very close to fear as they hurried up to the shuttlebay. Optimus pretended to ignore it, nodded jerkily, a strange elated panic singing through his lines. Megazarak. Megazarak *here*, of all places, the thing out of Megatron’s nightmares, here to fight—and presumably, kill—him.

It should have terrified him. Right now, it didn’t. Megatron had left him with a responsibility, the Decepticons themselves, and he would *not* allow them to fall into the servos of Megazarak. That would kill everything they fought for as surely as handing command over to Sentinel would. He had to do this, he *would* do this, and nothing else mattered.

“It’s to either the death or until the victor can kill the loser and chooses not to,” Strika was saying. “Single combat. Any handheld weapon is permitted; I have your axe, but if you want a blaster...”

“Will that even work on his armor?”

“No. Stay with the axe and your grapplers. Your jetpack’s waiting for you.”

“Thank you.”

“Interference is not permitted. Anyone who does interfere will be offlined by the DJD. You cannot appoint someone to fight for you. The moment you step into that room, you’re on your own.” She glanced down at him. “I’m sorry, Optimus. I...I had no idea he’d return.”

“Don’t,” said Optimus. “It was Megatron’s decision to have me succeed him, not yours. I won’t let him down.”

“If Megazarak wins, I’ll challenge him,” said Strika. “If all else fails, try to damage him badly enough that I’ll have a chance of winning.”

“Anything useful you know about how he fights?”

“He’s big, he’s fast, and he’s powerful. He has one of the old general-class frames; he’s designed to keep us unruly warframes in line. Originally, he would have carried some variety of devotion-coding to keep him from wrecking society for his own amusement—or usurping the Protector—but that’s likely long gone. When he was in command, as far as we could tell, all he wanted was power and control.” She paused. “And being able to humiliate people as he wished.”

“I know,” said Optimus. “I have some of Megatron’s memories of him. I won’t let him gain control of the Decepticons. We can’t afford to let him win.”

“My thoughts exactly.”

Ratchet met them at the shuttlebay doors, jetpack in his servos. “Here, kid.” To Strika, “No matter how Optimus does, we’re going to have to kill him.”

“No slag,” said Strika, already helping Optimus with the pack.

“All right. Ready,” said Optimus, watching the jetpack’s systems begin communicating with his own



on his HUD.

“Go slag him, kid,” said Ratchet. He traded a worried look with Strika.

Optimus pretended he hadn't seen that and strode into the shuttlebay, the crowd parting around him as he did. There was Overlord, smirking, blaster in servo. Slipstream, wings down, looking scared and uncertain. Jazz and Blurr, eyeing the mech in the center of the room, evaluating and deadly serious. Shockwave with his antennae canted back and very firmly several paces behind Blurr, as if he were trying to hide. Nickel at the forefront of the crowd, servos balled.

He was out in the center of the floor now, looking up at the newcomer. “Who are you and what do you want?” His voice sounded steadier than he felt; the realization of the sheer *size* of the other mech began to set in. He might be really, really fragged, he realized, and his servo clenched convulsively on the haft of his axe.

“My name is Megazarak,” said the mech, the voice exactly what it had been in Megatron's memories. Optimus forced himself to keep his servos still and looked up at Megazarak as he turned around.

He was even bigger than the memory, even pointier, and he was painted all in grays, like a corpse. The only thing that gave him away were the yellow optics, the slight movement of his claws. Even what remained of his brand was gray, not purple.

There were similarities to Megatron's frametype there, but Megazarak was bigger, far bigger, and instead of the flat utilitarian armor Megatron carried, Megazarak's was almost decorative, points and whirls and elaborations in the thick metal over his frame. His claws were longer, on the cusp of being too long for utility, and their edges had been sharpened like knives. Megatron had had points to his dentae, subtle but present; Megazarak had fangs that dented his dermas, even with his intake closed.

He looked down at Optimus and smiled, revealing the true length of those fangs, almost as long as the first two joints of one of Optimus's digits. “Is this Lord Optimus? I expected him to be...larger.”

The full force of his attention stopped Optimus's vents in his filters. He didn't want to meet Megazarak's optics. He wanted to run. Megatron on Earth had been bad, but Megazarak was an entirely different category of *worse*. Ancient, and malevolent, incredibly malevolent, and intelligent. The mech looking down at him didn't see another mech, just an object, an obstacle at worst, an amusing toy at the best.

Optimus forced himself forward, to stand level with Strika. Her servos were clenched at her sides, unmistakable hatred on her faceplate. And she was trembling, very slightly.

“I am he,” he heard himself say, and was shocked at how calm he sounded. “What is your business with us?”

“I challenge you for leadership of the Decepticons,” said Megazarak. The smile broadened. Primus, all of his dentae were sharpened to points. It was like looking at some kind of horrible Earth aquatic life. “Though, of course, you can always step aside, if you so wish.”

It was not the first time Optimus had faced the imminent prospect that he would die, but it had always been Megatron. Now, it swept over him as he held out a servo, and said, still somehow calm, “Not going to happen. Lord Megatron entrusted me with their functions; I will not give them to you.”

Megazarak still smiled. “You're not going to win this, little Autobot.”

“One way to find out,” said Optimus, and slid his battlemask over his faceplate. It felt strange

masking himself within his own ship. He stepped forward, and the crew of the *Conquest* stepped back, clearing a wide circle of floor.

*Try not to think about how one of his digits is as wide as one of your legs. Try not to think about those teeth or that smile or—*

The blow picked him up like a toy and threw him into the wall, hard. He scrambled upright and slashed at the reaching hand. Oh Primus, Megazarak was unarmed, he didn't need weapons. Optimus's tanks twisted with terror. Oh Primus, he was slagged. He was going to lose. He was going to betray Megatron's trust.

He couldn't leave them to Megazarak. He charged again, and this time managed to gouge Megazarak's arm on the way by before a blow knocked him to the ground. Megazarak laughed again, *let* him up, and an almost absent-minded kick sent him sprawling again. He rolled over, to his feet, and an enormous servo folded around him.

---

It wasn't a fight. It was slaughter.

Ratchet started forward, but Strika put a servo out to stop him. "We don't need you dead, too," she said softly.

"You're going to let Megazarak murder him and do *nothing*?" snarled Ratchet. "We *need* him!"

"It's a traditional challenge," said Strika. "We *can* do nothing. Optimus's spark—and his leadership—are in his servos alone." But something in her voice sounded far from certain, and Ratchet looked up at her, suspicion growing in his spark.

---

Optimus thrashed in Megazarak's grip, felt the servo around him tighten. He had one servo free, but couldn't *reach* anything, nothing that punching or kicking would do much damage to.

He still had his grapplers. Keeping up the kicking to distract Megazarak, he leveled an arm at the larger mech's face and fired.

It got him in the optics, flanges clamping down, and Optimus wound the cord around his wrist and yanked. The servo holding him jerked open, and he fell flat on his faceplate on the ground, scrambled upright, braced himself and yanked again.

Something tore. Something gave, with a hideous wrench of mechanisms, and Megazarak made a quiet noise of pain and menace. Optimus yanked again, and felt the fuel rise in his tanks. It was his optic, already halfway down the arch of his cheek, sensor line strained to the breaking point, and as Optimus watched, Megazarak raised a servo to that sensor line and cut it.

Optimus went sprawling, retracted the grappler. Fluids splattered over the plating around its housing,

and he tried not to think about it because here came Megazarak again, that smile, if anything, broader, the severed sensor relay bouncing against his cheek.

“And here I thought you were only a jumped-up consort,” he said, calm and almost pleased. “My, my. Dear little Megatron always did like stronger mecha to take care of him.”

Optimus scrambled for his axe. A stabilizer came down on it, snapping it. He rolled away, back upright.

He was unarmed. And fighting Megazarak. Oh frag.

---

Strika watched, and hated herself. She should have foreseen this, she shouldn't have put Optimus in such a position, but she had, and now she was only watching while Megazarak took him to bits.

Optimus was important. Optimus was their one hope for a good Prime, and he was *not* replaceable. Not with the two brands. Not with Megatron's spark part of his. He was a strategic genius, but he was also as close to an embodiment of *peace* as they were ever going to find, something she decidedly wasn't.

And he was the Lord of the Decepticons.

The penalty for interference was death. Which meant that no one would ever interfere lightly, and interference in the old battles for dominance, even before they'd become the Decepticons, even when it was brawls among soldiers, was in itself a demonstration of power—the ability to lead, the ability to win sparks. The newer Decepticons wouldn't remember this, but Strika did, Strika had seen it—

And for it to matter, truly matter, the one interfering had to willingly accept death as the price. That differentiated it from mere thuggish deception. That made it a sacrifice, not a dishonor.

The life of one General was a small price to pay for that of a Lord of the Decepticons, and even smaller for a hope of peace, or for the life of the future Prime.

Strika offlined her optics briefly, her processor made up.

---

Optimus kicked off the ground, fired his grapplers again, and caught Megazarak by a shoulder elaboration. Megazarak laughed, seized the cable, and looped it around Optimus's shoulders, yanking him in close. He tried to retreat, tried to unwind himself, but Megazarak had caught him firmly enough that all it did was make his jetpack engines whine in panicked protest.

“Less than an orn,” he purred into Optimus's audial. “That must be the shortest time a Decepticon leader to remained in power ever. Well done. Megatron would be so proud.”

“The Decepticons will never follow you,” snarled Optimus. “You've betrayed them too many times for that.”

“They don’t need to follow me,” purred Megazarak, and yanked him closer. Optimus struggled, futilely, against the cords of his grapplers. “I just need to kill you. Do you think you’re the only ones to come up with the idea of a Prime and Protector? We’ve killed one Protector...now only to deal with his Prime-to-be.”

“We?” Optimus’s optics narrowed. “So there is a conspiracy.”

“Your people might win this war,” said Megazarak. “But we’ll always be there. We’ll always be waiting.”

“Who?”

“A question you will take to the Allspark,” said Megazarak, and smashed Optimus into the ground. Errors popped up across his HUD, but Megazarak had let go of his grapplers and he retracted them as quickly as he could so they couldn’t be grabbed again. A massive servo caught him in the middle of the back and slammed him back down. He felt an optic crack.

Megazarak lowered his voice, for Optimus alone. “And once you’re there, don’t be surprised if you find your dear mate still spreads his legs for any mech he needs something from. You share Terminus’s memories; I’m sure you know of what I speak.”

Optimus bared his dentae and surged up, catching Megazarak off balance, charged him with a shriek of rage. Megazarak *laughed* and batted him out of the air. He slammed into a wall hard enough to dent it, and Megazarak picked him up in one servo, still laughing.

Optimus saw Strika move, almost cried out to stop her, but it was too late. Megazarak half-turned to see what Optimus was looking at, and Strika cannoned into him. He yelped and dropped Optimus.

What was she doing? She’d die for this, there was Overlord, and the only reason he hadn’t shot her yet was probably because he was too surprised!

Or because Megazarak had her by a stabilizer and was slamming her into the wall! If he didn’t do something, Overlord wouldn’t have to kill her, Megazarak would have done it for him.

Optimus grabbed his axe. Megazarak had only broken the haft; the blade was still operational. He fired his jetpack, trying to ignore the worrying crackling noises, and brought the axe down at the base of what looked like important altmode kibble. It sank in further than he’d expected, and Megazarak made a noise of agony.

“Hah!” Optimus grinned, dodged the reaching servo by dropping back to the ground, and hacked at the exposed thruster on the back of Megazarak’s leg.

Megazarak dropped Strika and whirled on him, reaching. Strika blasted him from behind with her built-in turret. He jerked back with another cry. Optimus sprang for his face and slashed. It glanced off his helm, didn’t actually kill him, but tore a gash across his faceplate from his missing optic to his chin. Optimus lunged in closer, going for his neck cables.

Megazarak broke and ran for his shuttle. Optimus almost went after him, but Strika was picking herself up, groaning, and Overlord took a step forward.

Optimus placed himself between them, broken axe still in servo, and snarled.

“You know the laws,” said Overlord. “General Strika has forfeited her life for yours.”

“Stand down, my lord,” said Strika. She wiped energon away from her intake. “I know what I have

done, and I know the price of it. Let my sacrifice serve as proof of Lord Optimus's worthiness, that he could inspire such loyalty."

"Not on my watch, you don't," snapped Optimus. His processor scrambled for a solution, because he knew damned well that he couldn't hold Overlord off, not right now, and using that kill-code would only make things worse.

But he wouldn't lose her. Not after Megatron. Why hadn't she ever considered that she was just as vital as he was?

*Win the war*, Megatron had said.

Without Strika, there would be no conceivable victory. Optimus didn't care if he had to rebuild the entire Decepticon Code (did they even have a code? The Autobots did, it was probably a safe bet) but he would keep her alive. He bared his dentae at Overlord. *Come on*, he thought. *I dare you*.

## Chapter 67

Ratchet was in motion before Overlord moved. “Strika, don’t be an idiot.” He pulled one of her arms over his shoulder, preparing to lift and drag her to the medbay if need be. Optimus had shoved himself in between them and Overlord. *Good mech.*

Strika wriggled free of his grasp and knelt in front of him, cupped his faceplate in a servo. “Whatever the reason Ratchet, I have broken a law, and must pay the price.”

“We can’t lose you,” he whispered. “Not you, not you *and* Megatron.”

“Do you think I would have lived if Megazarak had triumphed?” she asked. “Losing both Megatron and myself is bad, but us and Optimus too? We cannot afford that. No. One general’s life versus that of the Lord of the Decepticons is no choice at all.”

She bumped her helm against the top of his and stepped back, optics offlining briefly before she turned to Overlord and nodded curtly at him. She didn’t kneel. She didn’t bow her helm, she just stood, looking at him, as if she were waiting for him to say something instead of shoot her.

Overlord raised the blaster and placed it over her spark. His intake curled up in a smile.

“Stop,” said Optimus, loud and abrupt, as if he had only just thought of it. “Lower the blaster.”

“She has violated the laws of combat,” said Overlord, mocking. “Not even you can save her, *my lord*. Nor deny it. She’s the reason you’re still here, not a grease stain on Megazarak’s stabilizer.”

“The laws apply when a Decepticon challenges their Lord to combat,” said Optimus. “But Megatron defeated Megazarak and exiled him. No longer a person, not even worth killing...and certainly no longer a Decepticon.”

Silence at this. The corner of Overlord’s intake twitched, and his optics narrowed.

“It wasn’t a true match for leadership,” said Optimus, his voice still quiet. He was still bleeding, and the side of his faceplate was already swelling into one Pit of a bruise. One of his audial fins was bent, giving him a decidedly cockeyed appearance. “The rules didn’t apply.”

“And what proof have you of this?” said Overlord.

“The security recordings of that day,” said Optimus. “And the memories in my spark. Lord Megatron’s...and Terminus’s. Megatron did not offline Megazarak in honorable combat, all of you have the evidence of your own optics. Megatron judged Megazarak unworthy of that, and exiled him, for his base and cowardly attack upon Terminus. He meant to kill Megatron by forcing his bonded to suicide. That was the enemy Megatron vanquished. And because of that treachery, because of his *selfishness*, his *fear* of a lieutenant he saw eclipsing him, Megazarak is no worthy Decepticon. So Megatron judged him. So I judge him again. And so did General Strika, one of your number, ignorant of the depth of his malice, judge him as well. Would you send our greatest general to her death because she acted against a foul, cruel exile who sought to destroy all that we have fought for?”

Silence, several sparkbeats together.

Optimus turned, looking at them all. “Would you?”

People shuffled and looked at each other.

“Because,” said Optimus, “if you would, I will not lead you. You would be as unworthy as the traitor who just fled. Megazarak was no Decepticon. He did not share your spark. He did not share your courage. And if General Strika is killed, you are doing his will with your own servos. Remember your comrades. Remember the sparks he sent to death, because it was convenient. Because you were not people to him. To whom do you pledge your loyalty? To him? Or to the proud tradition Lord Megatron left us?”

The muttering increased. The mecha near Overlord eyed his blaster with the beginnings of vicious intent.

Overlord wasn't stupid. He looked around, then lifted the blaster slowly. “You make a valid point, Lord Optimus,” he said, sounding civil enough, but the effort showed.

“Good,” said Optimus, and there was steel in it. “General Strika, you have committed no crime. You have saved my spark.”

Strika inclined her helm to him. “As you have saved mine as well, you owe me no thanks... my Lord Prime.”

Optimus gave her a tight little smile, and his optics lifted to meet Ratchet's. “Ratchet? Bring General Strika to the medical bay. She requires your attentions.”

*I know my job kid* sprang to Ratchet's processor, but now was not the time. Instead he inclined his helm, and followed. Not without a nervous glance behind them. “Do you think we're going to see repercussions?”

“Given that he just scolded the entire Decepticon army like a bunch of recruits to save my spark?” said Strika. “Unlikely.”

Optimus was waiting for them in the medbay, sitting down on one of the berths with his helm leaned back against the wall. “Keep the scolding to small words, please,” he said. “My helm hurts, and even thinking about concentrating makes me want to purge.”

“Scan her,” said Ratchet to First Aid, and went to Optimus. “Did a number on your faceplate, kiddo.” He scanned Optimus. “Of course. You have an overabundance of nanites putting pressure on your processor. We're going to have to drain that. You'll want to be under for the procedure, trust me. Ambulon!”

---

The procedure was simple enough, for all its urgency, and Strika only needed a few dents banged out. Granted, one dent was in her fuel tank, and her faceplate would be slightly swollen for the next day or so, but she'd gotten off quite lightly. Especially when you looked at poor Optimus, who'd had to have an optic replaced and was currently sitting elbow deep in a solvent basin, soaking the various bodily fluids out of his grapple. The audial fin had been straightened, but was definitely still sore, and Optimus, too, was distinctly puffy around the faceplates. *His* dents had been more visually impressive, but overall less serious.

“Er, Ratchet?” said Optimus, and Ratchet looked up. Optimus sounded sheepish. Long experience as a medic had taught Ratchet that sheepish patients never meant anything good. “I know how you feel about mods but, uh, the getting-tied-up-in-my-own-grapplers thing is a problem. Do you have anything you could do? Strika suggested sharpening them, but I want to be able to rescue people with them without hurting them. Is there anything...?”

“Maybe,” said Ratchet. This was more reasonable than expected. “Anything else, kid?”

“Uh, yeah.” Sheepish look grew. “Sharpened dentae? Nothing dramatic. Just functional. I’d uh, like to be able to bite.”

Ratchet normally would have objected to such a cosmetic procedure, but the thought of Sentinel getting one hell of a nasty surprise if he tried anything untoward stopped him dead. “Sure, you want claws too?”

“Claws? No. No. I want to help people. Not accidentally scratch them or anything. This stuff’s for self-defense only. Unless you can make them retractable, no.”

“I’m a miracle worker, but a busy one,” said Ratchet. “Not there yet. I’ll see what I can do about the grapplers.”

---

What Ratchet could do turned out to be pretty impressive. Optimus looked down at his modified grapplers, and grinned. “This is perfect. Thank you, Ratchet.”

“Just don’t activate it when you’re already wrapped up in them,” said Ratchet. “Not without putting a thick coat of insulation on first. But anyone grabbing them should get a nice jolt of electricity. Should be enough of a deterrent.”

“And it won’t hurt people I’m trying to rescue!” Grinning with the sharpened dentae was a little weird. Thank Primus Ratchet had kept them subtle, but looking in the mirror, Optimus found he rather liked the touch of fang. It made him look...a little different. More serious. Maybe a bit like Megatron.

Strika loved the idea. Anything that made him look a little more Decepticon was good, and would help with loyalty. Especially, she added rather sourly, with the stunt he’d pulled to save her spark.

“Ratchet, really, they’re perfect.”

Ratchet flapped a servo at him. “I know, I know. No need to flatter.”

“Not flattery if it’s true.” Optimus rose. “Excuse me. I have something that needs doing.”

It was maybe silly that he’d waited until his dentae were sharpened to do this, (and he was inwardly very glad that the swelling had gone down a bit, though he still looked rather worse for wear) but it seemed appropriate. He and Strika had agreed that there would be no element of surprise to their attack. The Autobots had to have picked them up on scanners by now, and an attack on Cybertron was the next logical step. Megazarak’s mentions of a conspiracy meant he’d been sent by someone, likely this ‘King Rat’ Ratchet had been talking about. And it was important to forestall any rumors of Optimus’s demise.



Additionally, though he hadn't mentioned this to Strika, Optimus knew Sentinel and his behavior quite well. Sentinel hated him, could not bear to see him succeed. If he worked Sentinel into a rage, he might be more likely to do something unwise once the battle was joined. Push a little in the right direction before attacking, let him stew, then attack.

It was a great plan. He would have been pleased with it...if it hadn't involved the whole talking to Sentinel thing.

He hadn't told Strika of his full plan yet. He needed her to not seem complicit in any way whatsoever while he spoke with Sentinel. If she seemed startled, or surprised, so much the better, because then the film couldn't be used for propaganda. He needed to look powerful, and independent, or he would not be taken seriously, and Sentinel would decide Strika was controlling him. If she seemed taken aback, he couldn't make that claim.

It was manipulation, but necessary... and it was only fair, given Strika's own track record. She would understand.

That didn't mean he wouldn't apologize profusely afterward.

He came onto the bridge, adjusting the metalmesh cloak he'd picked up from his quarters.

"Open a comm to Cybertron." He stated a frequency, spark pounding. The cloak itched. At Strika's expression of confusion, he added, "I'm going to talk to Sentinel Magnus. I'm giving him one last chance." He squared his shoulders, surreptitiously checking the fall of the cloak, and faced the screen.

Sentinel picked up instantly. The air of smug superiority should have killed him on the spot. "Optimus old buddy! Calling to surrender?"

He looked tired, Optimus realized over the initial surge of nausea. Tired and frantic, his gloating confidence forced. There was a lump of un-buffed wax behind one of his audials. *You know you're looking down a Sharkticon's jaws, Sentinel, and you haven't figured out whether it's dead yet.*

The thought made him smile, showing the fangs.

"I'm calling to negotiate a treaty," he said. Strika glanced sidelong at him, concern, suspicion, and said nothing.

"Unconditional surrender," said Sentinel, optics suddenly blazing. "I *knew* you'd cave the second we got Megatron out of the picture. You've always need a proper strong bot to keep you in line—"

"You will surrender," said Optimus, before Strika leapt at the screen to throttle Sentinel—the force of her sudden rage was making his plating prickle. "We will allow you some ability to negotiate the terms. But you will surrender, and you will surrender now."

"And why would I do a thing like that?" It was through gritted dentae. Optimus felt like a coiled spring, tension aching in his lines, but he tamped it down. *I fought Megazarak. Sentinel is nothing.*

"Because there is still a chance you can walk away with your life from this, Sentinel," he said.

"Sentinel *Magnus*," snarled Sentinel.

"Then it's *Lord* Optimus to you," said Optimus. "There's a chance you can keep your spark intact. There'll be a fair trial. We'll push for imprisonment, not execution."

“You think I’m a coward, Optimus, you little ‘face drone? You think you can just—”

“You killed Lord Megatron.” Optimus felt his voice go sharp and hard and cold, and something in it actually brought Sentinel up short. “My consort, the former leader of the Decepticon Empire. You murdered him when he was helpless. This is the best offer you’re going to get, *Sentinel old buddy*, because otherwise, when we get there, and we will get there, we *will* bring your Cybertron down around your audials, you will *die*. It will not be nice. It will not be fast. Not unless I get there before any of my people do, in which case it will be *very* fast, and *very* lethal, *for old time’s sake*. So what’s it going to be?”

Sentinel trembled with rage, surged forward into the pickup with a snarled obscenity, promises of what he would do to Optimus if he even tried, little buybot that he was, and many rich, descriptive organic terms. Optimus flicked a servo at the communications mech, and the transmission cut.

Silence on the bridge for one vent, two.

Then Strika. “Why did you offer?” she asked. “He killed Megatron. He doesn’t deserve it.”

“Because he doesn’t deserve it,” said Optimus, feeling very strange, as if he were watching himself from a distance. He should feel more at what Sentinel said, he thought, and didn’t. “That’s what made it important. For me, for us, if we could offer it even though—that’s what makes it necessary, that we can do that.”

Strika just looked at him. He managed to smile up at her, tapped the shoulder with the Autobrand. “There’s a reason I kept this,” he said.

## Chapter 68

“Lord Optimus.”

Optimus inclined his helm politely. “Commander D-494, welcome aboard the *Conqueror*. I trust your journey was uneventful?”

“Yes indeed, my lord. It is a pleasure to be here.” The miner strode down the ramp from her shuttle, looking around, then bowed correctly to him. “And an honor to at last meet you. Lord Megatron always spoke highly of your skill. I was saddened to hear of his passing; he was a great warrior, and a great leader.”

“Thank you,” said Optimus. “He certainly was.”

“How soon do we move on Cybertron?”

“Yours is the last group to arrive,” said Optimus. “Once your people are settled in the correct assignments, we can start the approach.”

“Good.” D-494’s optics lit. “I look forward to our arrival. I have not seen my homeworld in seven millennia.”

“Seven millennia?”

The three clustered optics that served her for a faceplate narrowed. “One does not become a miner by choice, my lord,” she said.

“Oh,” said Optimus, abruptly understanding. He did not dare reach to touch her, as he would have with an Autobot, but he did smile. “We will see you home again.”

She blinked all her optics at him. “Thank you, my lord.”

---

Flying was...really fun, actually.

Jazz went screaming down the right flank of the shuttle (currently acting as a friendly) and toward the little knot of shuttles several hundred feet below them, dimly visible in the planet’s thick green cloudbanks. Most of the upcoming battle, Slipstream had noted, would take place in atmosphere; therefore, maneuvers were to be practiced in atmosphere as well. After the thick ugliness of this atmosphere, Cybertron would be easy.

Though this particular maneuver...wasn’t. This particular maneuver was the reason that Jazz had had to upgrade his jetpack several times in the last orn, and why the Jettwins had to keep rescuing him. At least Jetfire and Jetstorm found it amusing.

“*Approaching target,*” said Slipstream. “*Cut engines.*”

And here was the tricky part...and the most important. Cutting engines meant he’d have to glide—not something jetpacks were made for—but it would also decrease his energon footprint to undetectable levels.

*Here goes nothing*, he thought, and cut the jetpack engines, reconfigured the wings to the position he sincerely hoped would allow him to glide, and really hoped he wasn't about to fall out of the sky.

Over the trine bond, he felt Jetstorm and Jetfire's attention focus on him, waiting for the first hint of alarm or distress. After a long moment while absolutely nothing happened, he grinned. "*I think we've got it.*"

Jetstorm whooped.

"*Don't get cocky,*" said Slipstream. "*Over target now. Drop payloads.*"

---

After maneuvers, Jazz was off duty. He spent some time listening to Jetfire and Jetstorm chatter at him about that afternoon's success, then went to find some peace and quiet. At least he could do that now without the rest of the trine worrying at him about whether they'd done something wrong. He would dearly love to kick Sentinel's paneling up between his audials for that. Some things were necessary in war. Making two newsparks who'd worshiped the ground you walked on feel lonely, damaged, and unwanted wasn't. Flyers wanted trines, and if you didn't want a trine bond, you could at least make it clear that the reason wasn't that they were fundamentally repulsive...and he should have been putting them in positions where they could meet potential trinemates instead of isolating them.

The result was that the Jettwins were constantly worried that they'd done something to offend him, and the prospect terrified them. As time went on, they got better about it, but it was one pit of a lot of work. Jazz was glad that they'd trined with him, and not someone younger; it made him feel like an organic with offspring more than anything else. At least they'd gotten to a point where he could take time to himself occasionally without sending them into fits of anxiety, which was a much healthier place than they'd been.

Right now, he headed upwards to the observation deck. It was the best place on the ship to meditate. Or just sit and think about Prowl, which Jazz found himself doing more of these days. He wondered briefly what Prowl would think about the Jettwins, and smiled a bit, because while Prowl might have acted very aloof from the chaos the little flyers caused by existing, he would have likely been completely soft on them.

It would have been really nice to have had the help.

The observation deck doors slid open in front of him to reveal Overlord hunched over something, fingers flying over the keys of some device. A transmitter, Jazz realized.

He couldn't take Overlord on in a fight. He started to retreat, but Overlord had seen him, lunged at him with a snarl and bore him to the decking. Jazz thrashed, trying to get at his nunchucks. Overlord cuffed him with an enormous hand, almost casual, and his vision fritzed into static. When he came fully to his senses again, Overlord had him pinned and was speaking into his comms. "General Strika? I've caught the traitor..."

---

“I didn’t even think we *had* a traitor,” said Optimus, keeping pace with Strika. With some difficulty; for all her mass, Strika could move with startling alacrity when she put her mind to it. “Spies, yes, every army has those, but a high ranked traitor? It doesn’t make sense! Not with our pattern of victories and defeats!”

“Shockwave has been suspicious for some time,” said Strika. “He’s arranged Intelligence accordingly. That may explain the spy’s lack of success.”

“I see.”

They reached the observation deck to find Overlord and Jazz with most of the ship’s security around them, blasters leveled. Strika glanced down at Optimus, then around at the security. “What exactly is going on here?”

“Well,” said Trailbreaker, looking distinctly uncomfortable, “They’re both accusing each other of being the traitor, so I arrested them both.”

“Good mech,” said Strika, and turned her attention to Jazz and Overlord, Jazz distraught, Overlord smug. “What happened here?”

Optimus went to the transmitter. “Whoever it was, they erased the message.”

“Optimus,” said Jazz, and the tone of his voice brought Optimus up short. “Optimus it’s Overlord, kill me if you must but don’t trust him.”

“Get Shockwave,” said Optimus, ignoring him. “See if he can get any data off the device. Trailbreaker, what was the situation when you arrived?”

“Overlord had pinned Jazz next to the transmitter,” said Trailbreaker. “He said he’d been holding him there.”

Shockwave and Slipstream entered together. Shockwave went to the transmitter and started manipulating it; Slipstream went directly to Optimus. “My lord, with all respect, what is the meaning of this?”

“We have a traitor,” said Optimus, watching Shockwave. “It’s either Overlord or Jazz; they’re accusing each other. Either way, Overlord overpowered Jazz and had him pinned when the guards arrived.”

“And whoever did it had time to clear the message?” said Slipstream. Optimus nodded. “Where had Overlord pinned Jazz?”

“Here, sir,” said one of the security bots.

“It was hardly a thorough clear,” said Shockwave. “Probably simply a button created to dump. I can retrieve the data.”

That pointed more to Overlord than Jazz. Optimus couldn’t imagine Jazz being that sloppy. “What’s the timestamp on the dump, Shockwave?”

“Roughly twenty-five minutes ago, my lord.”

“Trailbreaker, timestamp on Overlord’s transmission?”

“Twenty-seven,” said Trailbreaker.

“So whoever dumped the data did it after the fight,” said Optimus, “Once Jazz was pinned. Unless he broke away. Do we have the security footage?”

“No, someone put it on loop,” said one of the security mecha. “Still trying to find the start point.”

“Soon as you can, please,” said Optimus. “Someone ask the Jettwins when they last saw Jazz. Compare the times.” He looked down at the patch of floor where Jazz had been pinned, then at the transmitter. There was no way Jazz could have reached that.

Behind him, Shockwave made a noise of satisfaction. “I almost have it, my lord.”

“The Jettwins report they were with Jazz three-quarters of a megacycle ago.”

“Here’s the timestamp on the alteration.”

Optimus looked at it, then at Jazz and Overlord. “This was made while Jazz was still with the Jettwins,” he said quietly, handing it to Slipstream. She looked at it and shook her helm. “No. He was in the hangar with me. We’d returned from maneuvers. And sir, think about it. Which of these two would the real spy have more to gain from accusing? If we kill Overlord, we lose a superweapon, someone whose primary value lies in being large, destructive, and threatening...and solitary. We’ve already lost Tarn; even the unit he commanded suffered minimal ill-effects. If we lose Overlord, again, it’s a loss that won’t have widespread repercussions. Jazz is a member of my unit. He is trined with two of my flyers. If he is executed, I have a broken bond—minor though it is—to deal with, and a large chunk of my lead wing will be out of action. Jazz is far more valuable in terms of widespread repercussions than Overlord is, and removing him is exactly the sort of thing the enemy would find most useful.”

“I concur entirely,” said Optimus, equally quiet.

Shockwave looked up at them. “Additionally, this message is addressed to Megazarak. And uses elaborate, formal praise.” He looked at Overlord. “This is out of character for Jazz. With his personality, and his history, he would likely report to Sentinel, not the former leader of the Decepticons.” He glanced down at the transmitter again. “And certainly wouldn’t address him as *most honorable lord and master of my spark*.”

There was a bellow of rage, blasterfire, and Optimus and Slipstream whirled as one, Optimus firing his grapplers. They struck at the joint of the thigh and pelvis, and Optimus immediately sent a surge of electricity through them. Overlord yelled, wrenched them free and came after him, Slipstream’s fire splashing ineffectively off his armor.

And then said “Erk,” and toppled over. Optimus looked at Strika, who stepped forward, looking pleased with herself.

“There are simpler ways to deal with him than fighting him,” she said, and Overlord convulsed, screaming.

“You killed him.”

“Yes. He attacked the Lord of the Decepticons, after betraying us, and wasn’t about to sit still for a fair trial. I killed him. It was my duty.”

Overlord was twitching, and the smell of semiprocessed fuel came to them, foul and sour.

“I’d like a word with you, Strika,” said Optimus, keeping his voice level. She was right, it was likely the most practical alternative, but the sheer nonchalance with which she’d dispatched Overlord

troubled him. If they won, they couldn't just kill everyone inconvenient!

"Lord Optimus, General Strika, a moment," said Shockwave. "We have a problem."

"Yes?"

"The message Overlord sent concerned Drift. Within the next four megacycles, Autobot command will know he intends to defect."

## Chapter 69

### Chapter Notes

Recommended music for this is the St. Crispin's Day Speech Music from Henry V (1989): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=doCf0WYEKho>

They couldn't warn Drift before Overlord's message reached Cybertron.

"Are D-494's people in position?" asked Optimus. He looked at Strika. "Do we have any reason not to launch the attack immediately?"

"None," said Strika. "Ready on your order, my lord."

"Let's start the approach. Shockwave, find a way to contact Drift. I don't want to leave him completely on his own."

"Yes, my lord," they said. Optimus drew a deep vent, looked around. Hopefully sudden Decepticon movement would distract the Autobots from the traitor in their midst. Or alert Drift to be ready.

He'd done what he could. Drift's fate was in his own servos. Now, he had to look out for those under his command.

Optimus headed for the briefing room.

---

*Conqueror* descended into the eager, organized chaos of a warship going into battle. Everyone had been stuck in a series of seemingly-endless briefings and training for the last year, but there were always final briefings, and Ratchet shook his helm as he left the briefing room, watching the next group go in; Slipstream and the rest of the aerial commanders. He hurried down to the medbay to brief his staff, ducking the groups of runners congregating in the corridors to receive their orders and postings.

The presence of the runners took him right back to the last war, and the old pneumatic supply delivery systems that would go out at the least provocation. Apparently, *Conqueror's* systems hadn't been replaced since then—hence the small groups of Autobots and Decepticons, mostly speedsters, towing antigrav carts.

"All right, everyone," he said. "We've been through this before. You know what to do. Chances are, though, that this time it's going to go on a lot longer. We'll be running on fumes before long. Keep an optic on each other. If you notice someone else fumbling, get them to recharge as soon as you can, and wake their counterpart on the other shift. We're going to have to rotate; we're looking at what could be several days of battle. Make sure you fuel regularly. Assistants, keep an eye on the surgeons. We're liable to forget—and look out for yourselves, too.

"That said, it's more than likely we won't have time to do any of the above." Wry laughter at that.



“But keep it in processor. Our exhaustion will cost lives. Beta shift, get in there and get some recharge. Alpha shift, with me. Let’s get prepped.”

---

Blurr stood to attention with the rest of the intelligence mecha as Shockwave looked them over.

“As you are already aware, your disguises come with one serious drawback,” he said. “Many of our ground troops will not recognize you as allies. Therefore, staying away from the main offensive is vital.”

Blurr darted a glance down at the Elite Guard insignia on his chestplates. It was still his; he’d never removed it. Well, not permanently, not outside of missions, and now it offered a peculiar sort of comfort even over a new paintjob. The weird thing was seeing his Decepticon colleagues with them too—and blue optics. Some mecha were really not made to do blue optics.

“You are all familiar with your targets. You are all familiar with your assignments, and the importance thereof. You are aware of the necessity of avoiding civilian casualties. Therefore, all I have to say to you is this: good luck.”

Blurr was pretty sure that Shockwave didn’t believe in luck, but a lot of people around him seemed to appreciate it. They filed out, murmuring well-wishes to each other. He remained behind. “Shockwave—”

“Agent Blurr.”

They looked at each other.

“I have every confidence in your ability to perform,” said Shockwave. “Go. Join your team. The fate of Cybertron rests in your servos.”

Blurr reached for him, and he transformed down into Longarm, brushed a servo over Blurr’s cheek. Blurr cupped the back of his helm, kissed him. Stepped back with a nod. “I’ll do what I can.”

Longarm smiled. “Neither General Strika nor I could ask for more.”

---

“That’s the last of them,” said Strika. “Time to get to the bridge.”

Optimus nodded, the gesture confident. “And all of them have been briefed on avoiding civilian casualties.”

Strika wanted to sigh in exasperation. It was war. People were going to die, even the civilians. But no, Optimus had his pretty fantasies, some of them still intact even now.

He caught her expression and paused in the corridor, placed a careful servo on her arm. “Our battle won’t be over when we take Cybertron,” he said, looking up at her. “It’ll be fought afterwards, with what we do to aid our fallen foes. Autobots of my generation were raised to think of the Decepticons as monsters, rapists and murderers, who care nothing for life if it is not one of them. We *must* prove

them wrong. We *must* step in and prove ourselves to be their protectors, better protectors than their last government. This battle isn't about taking a planet. It's about winning the sparks of the Cybertronian people—all the Cybertronian people, Autobots included. And if that means we lose some of our people trying to defend civilians, so be it. It's what we must do. It's what our cause must be about."

She looked down at him. He was absolutely right, and something in her old, jaded spark stirred at the tone of his voice, at the conviction behind his words.

"I understand," she said, and as that little smile grew to something like a proud mentor's, added, "You simply enjoy making my life difficult."

There was a moment where he obviously debated whether to take that seriously or not. She narrowed her optics with amusement, patted him on the shoulder with the Autobrand, and he relaxed somewhat.

"Your sense of humor leaves something to be desired," he said.

"So I've been told," said Strika, cheerfully. "Where's Slipstream?"

Slipstream was on the bridge, talking with the helmsmech. She straightened up when they entered, her wings hiked high and proud on her back. "General," she started.

"Air Commander," said Strika. "Anything to report before you join your squadron?"

"No sir," said Slipstream. She looked at Optimus, then at Strika. "Only... Thank you for bringing us home. If we offline today, at least it will be on Cybertron."

"Yes," said Strika, her spark squeezing tight, fondness for Slipstream and her courage, and pain at the very idea of losing her. "Yes, but take care not to offline. I should prefer you alive and well."

"Yes, General," said Slipstream, and smiled, a controlled, fierce expression. "I will do you proud." She looked to Optimus, then bowed. "My lord. Good fortune, and an honorable battle."

And with that, she turned and left the bridge. Strika watched her go, offlined her optics briefly, fought down the little selfish voice that cried, *Please, Primus, take what you will, but return her to me!* It did not do to give deities ideas, and it was her duty to do whatever would win them the day.

But that didn't mean her spark would break any less for what that might mean.

"Very well," she said aloud. "Let's be about it."

---

There wasn't much to do but wait. Jazz bowed his helm and tried not to fidget.

"Hey," said Jetfire, next to him, and a small servo touched his arm. Jazz looked at him, and Jetstorm insinuated his way between them. "Hey, Jazz?"

He looked down at them and smiled. "Yeah?"

"We are being glad to trine with you and not Sentinel," said Jetstorm.

“Don’t get hurt,” said Jetfire, and looked up at him. “Please?”

Jazz had to reset his vocalizer several times, and then settled for grabbing both of them in a bear hug. “Don’t you dare get hurt, either,” he said.

“We are being the best fighters in the Decepticon Army!” protested Jetfire, and Jazz laughed a little and hugged them harder.

When he let them go, they stopped fretting about him and started boasting, each trying to outdo the other. Jazz smiled, and watched them, and forced his processor away from the possibility of losing them.

---

The medbay was as organized as it was going to get when Omega Supreme’s voice came over Ratchet’s comms. “*Ratchet? Why am I not allowed to participate?*”

Ratchet’s tanks dropped. “Because I don’t want you to be hurt,” he said. *I don’t want you to be caught in a programming conflict about protecting Autobots. I don’t want to manipulate you into a battle. I was ordered to use you as a tool to win the war; never again.*

“*Other people will be hurt,*” said Omega. “*Arcee is fighting. You are fighting. I wish to help. I do not want my friends to be hurt instead of me.*”

Ratchet hesitated. “I don’t want to ask you to kill again,” he said, very quiet. The words Omega had spoken before dropping into stasis still rang in his audials, and he still didn’t know if he could forgive himself for them.

“*Oh,*” said Omega. There was a long silence. Then, “*I will not kill. I will protect people. I will protect civilians, and bring people to you, and other doctors, if they are hurt. May I help if I do that?*”

“I’ll check with Strika,” said Ratchet, knowing the answer would be yes. “Omega. Please.”

“*Yes, Ratchet?*”

“Don’t get hurt.”

“*I will try, Ratchet.*”

He’d made his choice, Ratchet reminded himself. And it was *his* choice this time, no manipulation of programming. His independent choice.

Primus, Ratchet hoped it wouldn’t kill him.

---

Optimus stood on the bridge and looked at the glitter of the Autobot fleet. There was already a battle, the bright flare of artillery, the clouds of escaped atmosphere. Drift and his people had been found out, were under attack. They would arrive in time to give them aid. *Ten minutes*, he thought, *only ten*

*minutes, Drift, hold on for that long,* and touched the button to the fleetwide communications.

“Today,” he said, hearing the echo of his voice, “we come home from long stellar cycles of exile. But what awaits us is not a friendly hearth and welcome fuel, but a planet divided, oppressed, hurt to the very spark, frightened of its returning children. If we are to have a home, we must first save it. Today is not about revenge. Today is not about our rage, but about our mercy, about the rescue of our brethren and the spark of our species. Cybertron was taken from us, and those who took it from us betrayed their own people, and today, we save those people. We make Cybertron the home *all* of us deserve. For Decepticon, AFF, Autobot, every Cybertronian.

“Today is not about revenge, or we shall have another war. Today, we *end* our wars. Today, we become one species. If we do not, we do not win anything, and every spark lost is in vain, for our war will continue, and the injustices of our past will repeat themselves. Today, we are powerful enough to stop that. We owe the dead that much.

“For Lord Megatron. For Lugnut, and Smokescreen, and Roller, and Terminus. For every dear spark we have lost, every friend we have seen mutilated, for every injustice we have suffered, we end this today. Never again shall we turn upon each other. Never again shall we torment each other and call it justice. Never again shall we live in chains for fear of our own brethren.”

He was silent a long moment, watching that glitter come closer, savoring the last vents before the silence was torn by battle.

“Freedom is the right of all sentient beings,” he said. “Today is the day we win it for ourselves.”

## Chapter 70

Lord of the Decepticons and Supreme Commander of the Autobot Freedom Faction he might be, but Optimus's primary experience was in commanding infantry, not ships. Most of the next part of the battle involved him staying out from under stabilizer and allowing Strika's naval expertise to come to the fore.

The first phase of the battle was to take Luna I. From there, they would have a base to attack Cybertron itself. Enough rotations, and they could simply bomb Fortress Maximus from orbit. (Optimus, of course, had immediately nixed that plan. Too many civilian casualties.)

*Conquest* lurched under him as the first shot struck the bow.

"Incoming transmission: Commander Drift to Lord Optimus."

"My station, please," said Optimus.

Drift's face blinked into existence in front of him. "Not a moment too soon," he said. "Thank you."

"My apologies; we only caught the agent as he sent the transmission," said Optimus. "What's your situation?"

"Better for your arrival," said Drift. He lurched; something in the background sparked. "Half my squadron followed me, and most of the *Lost Light's* crew. That gives us one squadron command ship, five frigates, twelve sloops, and their attendant smallcraft."

Optimus's optics widened. That was better than expected. "Glad to have you with us," he said. "You should have just received the situational analysis I sent, and your orders—assist in taking Luna I. For now, create as much confusion within the Autobot ranks as you can, and follow General Strika's orders."

Drift's optics flickered as he examined the documents. "Yes, my lord," he said. "We'll meet you on Luna I."

Optimus grinned. "Best of luck. We'll see you there."

The transmission ended. Optimus looked up at the viewscreen, and what he saw stopped the ventilations in his intake.

Cybertron glittered below them, blue veined in gold and pink, the biolights of the planet itself. Not a touch of Cybertronian-made light; the cities were dark, blacked out in preparation for an invasion. A shiver worked its way down Optimus's spinal strut, and for a moment he saw a world dead of Cybertronian life, abandoned by the species that knew it was home. It unsettled him deeply, more deeply than a sudden flight of fancy should have.

Between them drifted the Autobot fleet, spitting energon and rage. Optimus held himself still, counting the command ships, then let out a sharp vent of relief. Only three, and only one of those was Ultra Class.

It blew. He rose and hurried to the holotable, as a muted cheer arose from Strika's people. The little characters that denoted a sabotage unit tracked quickly away from the flaming wreckage.

"Well done," said Strika, plainly delighted.

---

Four megacycles.

Four megacycles found them in possession of Luna I, and the shipyards there.

“It must be a trap,” said Optimus. “I know the defenses. They shouldn’t crumple like this. Not unless they’re even more understaffed than we thought they were. It must be a trap; take all reasonable precautions.”

But it wasn’t a trap. The condition of the captured Autobots made that clear. They seemed shocked by the size of the rations they were given, and many drank them greedily without even checking them for poison or drugs, an oddity with Autobot paranoia. Ratchet scanned them, then reported glumly to Optimus and Strika.

“They’ve been underfueled for at least six orns, if not longer. Looks like our blockade worked.”

Optimus looked down at the report, and felt sick. “That doesn’t explain the understaffing,” he said.

“Think of the planets we captured,” said Strika. “We took a lot of prisoners.”

She was entirely correct; as the war went on and their resources expanded, the ‘catch and release’ policy on prisoners was no longer necessary. They could be kept and fueled adequately, and, as it meant he wouldn’t be handing helpless people back to a regime that might punish them for supposed treason, Optimus had been glad of it.

It also meant the Autobots had lost a lot of mechpower.

He’d had no idea it was this much.

The first few advance scouts landed on Cybertron itself a megacycle later.

The information they sent back made it clear it was even worse than Optimus or Strika had ever suspected.

“That’s why,” Optimus said, feeling sick. “They had an epidemic.”

“The natural form of Cosmic Rust,” said Ratchet. “Look at the scarring on that civilian’s faceplate. It’s only prevalent when the population in question is severely malnourished and their immune systems are compromised. Aren’t you glad everyone’s up on their inoculations?”

“That’s a lot of dead,” said Strika. “How long ago?”

“If I had to guess, a stellar cycle or so,” said Ratchet. “They’ve been running lean longer than our guests have.”

“Of course,” said Optimus. His tanks lurched. “Military gets top priority.” He didn’t want to think about the conditions of any prisoners. He looked up at Strika. “We’re going to have to rethink this campaign.”

“Yes, they’re likely to use guerrilla tactics,” said Strika, and gave him a look of some confusion when he frowned.

“No,” he said. “We’re not conducting an invasion. We’re running an aid mission, at least in civilian areas. What’s our supply situation?”

“We’ll want to take care of Sentinel as fast as possible,” said Strika, not listening. “In their current condition, they don’t have the morale or the organization to recover from that. The faster we break his hold on Cybertron, the faster we can assist the civilians...safely.”

“We don’t want the military presence in outlying regions to come crawling up our exhaust pipes the whole time,” said Optimus. “Strika, who do we have who’s sensible enough to be trusted with aid, but can defend themselves?”

“I’ll rearrange the assignments,” said Strika.

“I’ll get the mobile medical units ready,” said Ratchet.

“Very good,” said Optimus, and looked back down at the screen.

*Primus, he thought, looking at the dead and the living, Sentinel, what were you thinking? You should have protected them. You should have surrendered before we got to this point! They’re your citizens, Sentinel, how were you so blind?*

At the bottom of his tanks, guilt curled. *And I helped you do this*, he thought. *Primus, if I’d known—!* But there hadn’t been much he could do, he knew that. He’d tried to negotiate a ceasefire, and Sentinel had refused. The only thing he could have done was refused to fight in the first place, and what would that have done to the Decepticons, to the AFF? But lack of options was no excuse. The devastation of Cybertron, of the people there, was still in part his responsibility.

*I’ll make it right*, he thought. *Cybertronians deserve better than this. I’ll make it right.*

---

Even the middle of the war hadn’t been this bad.

Ratchet looked around, and shut down his olfactory suite. This was supposed to be a civilian hospital. They’d encountered no resistance when they came in, and he’d quickly co-opted the resident doctors, taking over as the temporary administrator.

Autobot though they were, they’d been glad to see him, and a glance around what served them as a main ward demonstrated that they had good reason. Frag’s sake, they’d run out of *tubing*. Basic anti-rust treatments! Antibiotics, and the horrors certain organic bacteria could wreak on a weak frame were incredible.

He’d already seen the mortality rates. He was impressed by how low they were, all things considered.

He touched his comms. “*Conqueror*, I’m sending you a list of medical supplies. Deliver them to my location as soon as possible.” He turned to the head doctor, who was looking very relieved at being supplanted, and clung to the energon cube he’d been given as if he feared Ratchet would take it away. The only difference between staff and patients here seemed to be paintjobs and who was still upright. “Sip that slowly,” he said. “I know it’s weak, but we can’t have you purging. Now, what’s your situation for solvent?”

“None,” said the doctor. “They wouldn’t give us any. The pumps are out.”

“Shuttlescrap. *Conqueror*, we’ll need an engineering team to repair the pumps.” There weren’t any spare beds, but he gestured at the other doctor. “Sit down. You’re swaying. We’ll take it from here.”

---

*Well, thought Blurr, at least they aren’t all dead?*

It was humor or purge.

The guards had put up quite a fight, but they’d turned the prison’s own defense systems against them, and the might of the Elite Guard was currently curled in an office, sleeping the effects off. Blurr had taken one look at the prisoners, and called for supplies. And a medical team.

The plan had been to free the prisoners and lead them against the Elite Guard. Neither the Elite Guard nor the prisoners were in much of a condition to fight. The medics were fueling them—the survivors, at least—carefully. There were similar reports coming in from all over Cybertron.

*How did I miss this?* Blurr wondered, but he already knew the answer. On his previous espionage missions on Cybertron, he’d only interacted with other mecha when it was vitally necessary. He’d been gathering specific information, carried his own fuel, and been almost exclusively around military installations. He hadn’t seen the prisoners up close, and had simply counted and run. The conditions off Cybertron had to have been somewhat better. But in any case, his interactions were extremely limited, and it could have been overlooked.

And he’d been sloppy. He mentally kicked himself.

But what about their other operatives? Not a peep about Cosmic Rust. Not a peep about famine. Were the Autobot counter-security measures so good?

Or had Shockwave been sitting on the information? Now there was an unsavory thought, and it would be all too typical of Shockwave. Blurr made a face, and a mental note to confront Shockwave as soon as possible, and went back to work.

---

The attack on Fortress Maximus was still one frag of a battle, and Strika mentally shuddered to think of the losses she would have incurred had the Autobots still had fighting spirit. She wouldn’t have let Optimus participate at all if they’d encountered the same level of resistance they would have in that case, and as it was, she and her people were playing *keep the Decepticon Lord as far from the serious fighting as we can without him noticing*, which they were, fortunately, all quite good at after millennia dealing with Megatron. Optimus yelled less about being picked up, and it had apparently never occurred to him that his loyal troops might stoop to such treachery.

At least he had a sense of Autobot treachery. All the street signs in Iacon had been destroyed, leaving it nearly unnavigable for someone as long out of practice as Strika—or any of the Decepticons. Someone they’d believed to be Intelligence directed them down a certain street, and it was only Optimus’s quick correction that kept an entire column from getting lost in the Dead End. The



'Intelligence agent' had vanished before they could catch her.

Another column did get lost. Jazz and Slipstream had to guide them out. It was generally embarrassing for all involved, but at least it wasn't fatal.

Strika ducked behind a building, feeling it shudder with the force of the shot. She looked around. Next to her, Cyclonus examined his swords with detached interest. Blackout shifted his rotors with annoyance.

She looked across the alley. Spittor and Oil Slick waited there, Scalpel bouncing excitedly on Oil Slick's shoulder. He'd insisted on coming along, even though Ratchet had remarked to Strika that if she allowed him at anything but heavily armed Autobots—and even then kept an eye on him—he'd personally make sure her next fuel systems overhaul was *memorable*.

Scalpel and Ratchet did not get along.

Strika looked back into her side of the alley, then at the other half of her team in time to see Scalpel make an obscene gesture. What she did not see, however, was Optimus.

"Frag," she said, absolutely sparkfelt.

---

Optimus had been distracted.

Strika was probably going to pin his audials to the nearest broken wall for this, but he was needed.

"Just hold on," he said to the Autobot, who looked up at him with terrified, agonized optics. "I'll get you out. Stay still."

The Autobot whimpered, her optics fixed on what was behind Optimus. She was very small, only a little bigger than Bumblebee. The Elite Guard insignia on her chest looked as if it had been painted on that morning, and dirt and debris clung to the tacky surface. Young, even younger than Smokescreen, a little blue and gold and white frame trembling with pain and fear and horror.

"Just look at me," Optimus said. "Keep looking at me. That's it. Good bot. You'll be all right, I promise."

He braced himself to lift the slab pinning the Autobot's legs. His stabilizer slipped in spilled energon and oil; he set himself better and tried again, servos protesting.

He jammed a chunk of rubble under the slab to keep it up, then dragged the little Autobot free. The Autobot crumbled over on herself, keening. Her plating felt oddly delicate in his servos, and with a shock of horror, he realized why. She'd not received her final upgrades. Her plating hadn't had time to harden into proper protective armor, she hadn't received the programs to persuade it to do so. Primus, had she even developed an ability yet?

"I'm sorry," said Optimus, patting her back. He forced himself to look up at the remains of the Autobot's squad. It was impossible to know for certain whose artillery fire had brought down this building, but given the direction, it was probably Autobot. The little bot he held had been fortunate; the portion of the wall that had fallen on her was small, and had only crushed her legs. The rest of the alley had accounted for the rest of her squad. Servos protruded from the rubble, already gray, one

severed helm, optics black and unseeing, had rolled into a corner and come to a rest, upside-down. By the way it was dented, its owner was just as young as the bot he'd rescued.

Optimus had scanned the rubble for life. There had been none. "I'm calling for the medics, all right? You'll be safe there. They're on their way. I'm sorry."

The Autobot curled in his arms, sobbing, too lost to even realize he was an enemy.

He could hear Strika's voice ahead, and sent her a fast comm. "I've got an injured civilian," he said, not feeling much guilt at the lie; the Autobot should have been a civilian, in a decent world. "The medics will be here in a few minutes. Situation?"

*"Tenable until then," said Strika, "but heed this, Lord Optimus, when we get back I am tying you to one of the medical berths for this idiotic stunt. Ratchet seems to be the only person who can keep you in line."*

"Very funny," snapped Optimus. Under other circumstances, he would have been willing to put up with her banter, but with the tangible cost of this battle in his arms, he didn't have the spark.

Strika, in a rare moment of diplomacy, said nothing.

Optimus looked down at the frame in his arms. Her optics were dimming and flickering—shock. "Hey," he said, and took one of her servos in his. "Stay with me, cadet. Come on. They'll be here soon, just hold on. Just talk to me. What's your name?"

Her optics dimmed further.

Optimus reached back in his memory to training, tried to copy the exact intonations of Ultra being commanding. "That was an order, soldier. Name?"

Her optics got a little brighter, and she focused on him, puzzled. "Don't...have..."

Primus, she couldn't have been online more than a few days. Optimus felt his mouth tremble, horror or grief, he didn't know which. "You've more than earned one," he said. "Just hold on for me, all right?"

"You're not..."

"I'm here. That's all you need to worry about." Her grip on his servo became painful, and then, *finally*, the medics caught up.

"I'll take it from here," said Nickel, dropping back onto her stabilizers and deactivating her jetpack. "You did a good job keeping her out of shock. Now go!"

"You're all right," Optimus said to the injured bot. "They'll take care of you."

He wasn't sure if she heard him, but Strika needed him. He transformed and fled the alley.

---

"Hope none of that's yours," said Strika, as Optimus came skidding around the corner and threw himself out of alt. It earned her an incredibly dirty look.

“An entire Autobot team got crushed in the alley back there,” said Optimus. “One survivor. Strika, they were *newsparks*.”

“Oh, so they’re back to that,” said Strika, and ducked around the corner of the alley to return fire.

“It’s obscene,” said Optimus. “Her upgrades weren’t even complete. She couldn’t have been more than a few days old.”

“Neither was I.” He stared at her in horror. She shrugged. “Long proud Autobot tradition, my lord. You didn’t know?”

“No,” he said, dentae bared. “I didn’t. And it ends now. Today. Do we have air cover?”

“Slipstream reports ready. Your errand of mercy helped our timing remarkably.”

“Then let’s do this.” He slung the blaster down off his back, replacing it with his axe, and clicked the safety off. “Cybertronians, *rise up!*”

---

He didn’t really remember how they got into Fortress Maximus. He was too angry. He remembered yelling a lot, and the visceral joy of combat seizing as it rarely ever did, and the elation of riding the wave of rage and feeling utterly justified. He remembered brief impressions of snarling faces, of energon bright on his servos, remembered the smell. Remembered pulling himself back again and again from landing a killing blow. He came so close. Time after time, it would have been easier, but he remembered the series of checks, of resistances.

He heard Strika next to him screaming her joy. She batted him out of the way once, took a blow that would have offlined him, but skidded harmlessly off her armor, and he heard her laugh in the Autobot’s faceplate.

And then the blow he struck was countered by a shield. A sword came down at his face. He caught it on the haft of his axe and kicked hard. His stabilizer met the shield. His opponent retreated, and Optimus pressed his attack, a flurry of blows.

“Still sloppy!” Sentinel screamed at him, muffled by his battlemask.

“Effective!” Optimus snarled in return, and slammed the butt of the axe into Sentinel’s helm.

Sentinel fell back again, and Optimus pursued, still fueled by battle-rage. He did not remember the corridors he chased Sentinel through. It did not seem like many. All he saw was Sentinel, Megatron’s murderer, the one responsible for the starving mecha in the streets, the one responsible for the dying newsparks, the one who had destroyed the world he’d been entrusted with.

They were in an office. Sentinel couldn’t run further. Something in Optimus roared its triumph. Sentinel helpless. He would kill him. He would hear him scream, he could all but feel the heat of his energon, the crunch of breaking plating.

*That’s not me*, he realized with dreadful clarity, and hesitated.

Sentinel slammed the butt of his sword against the controls to the doors, and they snapped shut.

“Gotcha,” he said, and the smug satisfaction brought Optimus fully out of it.

He was appalled. How had he been so stupid? He was separated from his people, alone in a room with Sentinel; a quick ping to Strika found Sentinel had set up a jammer. He was an idiot! He'd allowed his rage to control him. Maybe Strika should tie him to a medical berth! He looked around.

And almost let out a vent of relief. It was the Magnus's office. The Magnus Hammer stood in a corner, and that was a weapon he could use. That was a weapon Sentinel had never seen him use. He kept the victory off his faceplate.

They were equally matched otherwise, but Sentinel couldn't use the Hammer. That was what all the intelligence reports said, and Optimus knew Sentinel. He wouldn't have been able to resist the temptation to wield it if he could.

"You're not going to win this, Optimus old buddy," said Sentinel. "Not without your Decepticons to save you. I see Megatron put his mark on you. Do you really think that's going to protect you here?"

The rage flared up again. Optimus mastered it. It was a weapon; if he let it ride him, he'd make mistakes again, and he couldn't afford that.

Strika and the rest of the team would have to fend for themselves. Right now, he had to take down Sentinel.

"You should have surrendered," he said. *Distract him, make him angry. Say all the things you've wanted to say to him.* "When you ran out of fuel for them, when they started dying of a perfectly preventable disease—you should have surrendered!"

"Like you could have done better?" spat Sentinel. He slammed his shield into Optimus's chest, driving the atmosphere out of him. "I wasn't going to hand them to the Decepticons! I'm not a traitor!"

"Yes you are," said Optimus, blocking the next blow with the blade of his axe. "You betrayed their faith in you for the sake of your pride and your fear, Sentinel. You're a coward, and people died because of it. You killed your own people because you were *scared!*"

Sentinel's optics blazed. "Never call me a coward!" The blows rained down fast and hard, and it was all Optimus could do to block them. "Shareware! Traitor! You turned on your own people so you could have your tight little port filled, and you call me the *coward?*"

Sentinel brought the shield down on Optimus's upraised axe with all his might, and the haft splintered apart in Optimus's servos. He released it and threw himself aside. Sentinel's shield bit into the desk.

Sentinel slid his battlemask apart and grinned. Optimus tried to ignore that, the way his tank crawled at that expression, and set himself in a fighter's crouch. "I left because I wanted to keep our people safe, Sentinel," he said. *I've faced Megazarak*, he reminded himself. *Sentinel should be nothing.* But disgust and fear crawled through him. He felt open and helpless, darted a glance at the locked door. How long would it take Strika to cut through that?

The grin dropped off Sentinel's faceplate. "That's what you said about Elita."

Optimus dodged barely in time, and Sentinel yanked his sword out of the wall with a snarl. Optimus looked around for something, anything to use as a weapon, and Sentinel slammed into him, discarding sword and shield in favor of locking his servos around Optimus's neck and slamming his helm into the floor. Optimus grunted, feeling an audial deform under the blow, broke the chokehold and rolled, came down with a knee hard in Sentinel's interface array. He used that to push off,

scrambling for the Hammer.

Agony tore through his left stabilizer and he went facedown on the floor, the Hammer several inches out of his reach. He tried to move forward, and the pain whited out his optics. He collapsed, managed a glance over his shoulder to see Sentinel doubled over, one servo on the hilt of his sword, which he'd driven through Optimus's leg, just below the knee, and into the floor.

Optimus bowed his helm and panted, trying to push the pain to the back of his processor. His servos trembled, clenched into fists. He couldn't turn over and use his grapples, not without doing terrible damage to his leg, and every circuit in his frame rebelled against moving, doing anything to make it worse.

Behind him, Sentinel rose with a scrape of metal on metal, and a laugh. "Are you done trying to be a hero, Optimus?"

He'd come up with a pithy remark about that. He really would, if he could think through the pain. Optimus managed a groan in response.

"Ultra Magnus was right." Footsteps, the sound of a desk drawer opening. "It's not in your programming. Look what you've done. Cybertron's in *ruins*, because of you." The drawer slid closed. Optimus tried to will himself to move, but the pain got in the way, the horror, the knowledge that it was Sentinel standing over him froze him in place and helpless. Sentinel came into view, a pair of stasis cuffs in one servo, a smirk on his faceplate. He squatted in front of Optimus, put a finger under his chin to force Optimus to look into his optics. "Every death, Optimus. It's *your fault*, just like Elita. Even Megatron's. You made me do that. I wouldn't have killed him, if you hadn't bonded with him. I wouldn't have needed to. But with him alive, there was no way of redeeming you."

Optimus tried to break optic contact. The Hammer was so close that his plating prickled with it. If Sentinel got those stasis cuffs on him, he'd have a hostage, and Strika and her people might do something stupid to try and keep him safe. And Sentinel could do anything he wanted to him in the meantime. Sentinel put a thumb on his chin to keep him still.

"We won't kill you," said Sentinel. "Unlike Decepticons, we're civilized. You'll stand trial for what you've done, Optimus. And maybe, *maybe*, if you ever apologize, if you ever act sorry for the atrocities you've committed, I'll think of taking you back, even with that Decepticon's filth in you."

Optimus was trying not to listen. If he listened, if he allowed Sentinel's words to register, he'd break, he knew it. He thought about Strika, his team, about the little broken frames in that alley, about Ratchet and his people waiting to give aid, and a voice within him, Megatron or Terminus, or his own, impossible to tell, demanded, *Is your guilt so great you would hand yourself to this preening fool? You know who is at fault! You know what you must do!*

*He has no right to touch you! You are your own mech!*

**MAKE HIM PAY.**

He wrenched his helm and bit Sentinel, hard. Tasted energon as Sentinel howled, felt thin servo armor crunch between his sharpened dentae, and in the same movement flung himself forward. He heard himself scream, Sentinel's sword dragging through armor, its energy blade cleaving armor and circuits like thin plastic, but his servos were around the Hammer, and he felt it leap into awareness, into being, with a readiness he'd not even felt in it while fighting Megatron. Sentinel snarled down at him and Optimus reached through the Hammer and brought the bolt up from the very circuits of the planet itself.

It wasn't much of a bolt. He'd seen Ultra Magnus fry mecha's circuits with a single blast in the history vids, burst optics and all. All this one did was knock Sentinel into stasis, slightly singed.

There was a quiet fizzing sound, and the sword deactivated without Sentinel's ability to fuel it.

The Hammer dropped from Optimus's servos, clonking Sentinel in the helm on the way down, and Optimus curled over himself, shuddering. He needed to get up. He needed to let them in. He scrabbled at the edge of the desk for purchase, trying to keep the weight off of his mutilated stabilizer. Paused, looking at the stasis cuffs in Sentinel's nerveless servo. Lowered himself back to the floor and cuffed Sentinel securely, then went back to trying to drag himself upright.

He braced himself with both arms, shaking, on the desk, injured stabilizer lifted well off the ground. It seemed a very long way to the door lock, he thought. He made the mistake of looking down at his leg and his arms felt abruptly weak. He forced himself to stare at the desk again, stared until his vision stopped fuzzing static.

The door opened.

Rather, the door exploded inward under Strika, and Optimus clung to the desk and looked up at her, saw the relief in her faceplate. "Thank Primus," she said. "Is he contained?"

Optimus nodded, servos trembling. "He is," he said. "I used the Magnus Hammer."

Strika snorted. "Yes, a thump from that over the processor should drop just about anyone." She strode over to him.

"No," said Optimus. It seemed very important. "I used the Hammer. Its powers."

"Oh." Did she seem taken aback? Cyclonus and Blackout arrived, Blackout moving awkwardly in the confined space, and collected Sentinel's unconscious form.

"Don't kill him," he said. His own voice sounded odd to his audials. "Don't kill him. I want him on trial. He's hurt so many people."

His arms gave out at that point, and Strika only just caught him before he collapsed. He felt the rigors, wanted to just hold still but couldn't, shook so hard his dentae rattled.

"You're leaking like a ruptured cube," Strika said. "Ratchet's on his way."

She swept the desk clean with a servo, then placed him gently on it. "Hold still. I'm applying a field patch." A hand clamped over his thigh, just above the knee. "It will hurt."

It did hurt. Optimus screamed again, distantly hated himself for it, but it hurt too much for anything more. There was heat and hideous wrenching wrongness, and it was all he could do not to fall into stasis right there. After far longer than he thought he could bear, it was over, and Strika's energon-begrimed servo stroked over his back, again and again. "You've done well," she said. "Megatron would be proud. You did well."

Optimus sobbed static and pressed his helm to the desk, the cool metal a relief, and ventilated. That was enough a victory on its own.

## Chapter 71

The Decepticons led the efforts to pick up the pieces.

As Strika said, it wasn't like they didn't have plenty of experience. They'd been defeated and starving enough times that picking up the pieces was hardly new.

They were pretty slagged good at it, Ratchet had to admit. They'd converted the largest building available, the Elite Guard housing, into a hospital with remarkable speed, knocking out as many walls as they could, stabilizing it, replumbing the entire damned thing, and then rewiring it to support medical equipment, all within about five days.

Ratchet's people managed to scavenge appropriate equipment *very* rapidly. He hoped things would settle down to the medal-giving stage. A *lot* of people deserved medals. Because right now, they'd managed to build a functioning hospital for the whole *planet*, and people were coordinating things very well indeed. Supplies rushed in. There was an energon surplus, and you could thank Optimus's political maneuvering for that. Even flat on his back in a medical berth—or limping cautiously around on his rebuilt leg—he was one frag of a politician. The Galactic Council had offered help, for frag's sake.

Ratchet shook his helm. He couldn't remember the last time there'd been an energon surplus, but then again, the current population on Cybertron was a fraction of what it had been before the great war.

And then there was the way people looked at him.

Optimus absolutely hadn't noticed. He'd probably be upset if he did. But people watched him with hope in their optics, listened to him even when he was talking about inane things like rebuilding factories, or solvent pumps, or whether one of the Galactic Council merchants was cheating them. And when he made his rounds, talking to everyone he could before his new leg objected and he had to sit, they *really* listened.

Ratchet couldn't remember even seeing a Prime command such attention.

The rebuild of his injured leg wasn't that great of an issue, but Ratchet wanted to keep an optic on his spark. The damage from the broken bond was still apparent, and there was the other issue that worried him. *Win the war*, had been Megatron's last words to Optimus. Optimus had won the war. What he might do next was the question that worried Ratchet.

He'd have to release Optimus soon, but Strika promised to watch out for him, and that was something of a comfort.

Optimus didn't seem to mind much. He'd insisted on staying on the main ward, however, and this had turned into an excellent example of transparency in government. People dropped by to see how he was doing, and most importantly, *what* he was doing, and he usually seemed quite happy to explain it in painstaking detail. A number of the Autobot newsparks they'd rescued from the battle refused to leave his side, agitated to be put in berths near his, and listened attentively to his every word.

"I'm glad they do," he said, when Ratchet brought it up. "We're going to need administrators. Competent ones. It's driving Strika mad, and Jazz and I can't keep up with all of it forever."

The little cadet Optimus had rescued from the collapsed alley was his most enthusiastic pupil, and

had taken to learning every law or regulation she could get her servos on by spark. She could shortly recite Decepticon codes of law, complex and circumstantial though they were, and Autobot, and was working on the charter of the Galactic Council. She had no compunction about correcting Optimus, or Strika, or quite probably Primus Himself, if given the chance.

“That one will be trouble,” said Strika one evening, as she and Ratchet shared a cube in the staff break room.

“Oh yes,” said Ratchet. “You’ll have no argument from me on that.”

“She named herself,” said Strika. “Finally. The young Autobots are so reluctant to. I don’t understand it.”

“That’s because we’re supposed to give them names. Traditionally, they’re not supposed to have any say in it. What did she go for?”

“Strongarm,” said Strika, sounding pleased. “I’d mentor her, but she seems to have fixed on Optimus instead, and I’d never get any work done with someone reciting regulations at me.”

Ratchet snorted into his energon. “No, you certainly wouldn’t. And she’s not about to start bending rules. I think she’s decided that’s what killed her team, her superiors bending rules to drag newsparks into the fighting. I can’t blame her.”

“I can’t blame any of them,” said Strika. She rubbed her nasal ridge. “Primus, what a mess.”

“We’re doing our best,” said Ratchet.

“It’s not enough.”

“Things like this are never enough,” said Ratchet. “We do what we can.”

Strika reached to pat his servo. “Thank you.”

---

*Primus, what a mess.*

It, or variations thereof, seemed to be the new universal greeting. Primus, what a mess, people said, and then looked at him like he might be able to refute it.

Optimus learned to simply say, “Yes,” and then smile at them, and tell them how much their help was needed. Sometimes they’d listen. Whether or not they had, he usually reached to pat them on the shoulder, and thank them for doing specifically what they needed to do, and reiterate how important it was.

It seemed to work.

After some debate, they called in Isaac Sumdac. Sari came too, and went off with Bumblebee, doing whatever those two got up to. There were plenty of people to keep an optic on them, at least. It was better than having them running around underfoot in the hospital.

“We’re going to need help,” he said, once Professor Sumdac settled in the hastily juryrigged human-sized chair. “A lot of it. Can we work out a trade agreement? Our infrastructure is badly damaged,



and while we have the materials, we don't have the people, and our experts can't be all over the planet at once."

"Optimus," said Professor Sumdac, clearly unsettled. Optimus looked down at him.

"Are you all right?"

He *almost* said *I'm fine, Professor*. He almost did. He felt his faceplate stiffen as he lined up the lie, and realized before he spoke that he was far better at lying than he should be, because he could do it, and then in the next moment, that it *was* a lie.

He looked away.

"I heard about Megatron," said Professor Sumdac. "I'm sorry. It is never easy."

Optimus looked down at him. There was real sympathy there.

He didn't know what to do with it any better than Cybertronian sympathy.

"It doesn't matter." The words sounded harsh to his own audials. "As long as I can do my job."

The worried expression on Professor Sumdac's face didn't go away.

"Cybertron comes first," said Optimus. "Sentinel did a lot of damage."

"Yes," said Professor Sumdac. "He did."

Optimus looked away.

"You can take time for yourself," said Professor Sumdac. "I'm sure Jazz and Ratchet can manage very well."

"I don't want to take time for myself," said Optimus. "It means..."

It meant he'd have time to think, to feel. He didn't want to do either.

He glanced down at Professor Sumdac again. That look was back.

"I have too much work to do," he said. "And I can't just leave Ratchet and Jazz and Strika with this. I led this revolution, I must repair the damage I did."

"Optimus, we cannot do anything to help you if you will not accept it," said Professor Sumdac. "I know that it is difficult. But it will be no better if you try to bury yourself in work. Believe me, I know."

He was trying to help, Optimus reminded himself. "Thank you," he said. "But I'm needed." He managed a smile. "When Cybertron's restored, I'll have time to mourn."

The look he received was doubtful in the extreme.

"If you need anything, you have my number," said Professor Sumdac. "We'll help Cybertron, as long as you promise me that if you need to, you'll call me."

Optimus wished he'd been completely confused by that. He wasn't. He looked down at Professor Sumdac and slowly nodded.

“Now,” said Professor Sumdac. “About the assistance we can offer...”

---

“He isn’t doing well.”

Ratchet snorted. “Really? What tipped you off?”

“That he nearly lied to me.”

“A large part of being a leader is telling good lies,” said Ratchet. “He learned that the hard way.”

“He isn’t doing well,” said Sumdac again, and folded his arms. “What will happen when he runs out of things to do?”

“Why do you think he’s still in the hospital?” said Ratchet. “We’re looking out for him. He hasn’t grieved normally at all, and I’m worried. The first few days he wouldn’t move, but after that...”

“He threw himself completely into his work and hasn’t shown a sign of mourning since?”

“Exactly. And the encounter with Sentinel was very bad.”

Sumdac glanced at him sharply. “Very bad?”

“Almost lost him a leg. It was very close.”

“I didn’t like his relationship with Megatron,” said Sumdac. “Megatron was...manipulative and cruel, and Optimus too innocent. But it seems he loved Megatron very deeply.”

“Yes,” said Ratchet. “He did. And Megatron loved him very deeply in return. He’d already lost one mate, did you know that? At the end of the last war. That he was willing to accept another was extremely unusual for our species. He was very good to Optimus. Very, very good. I know you were worried about it, but you didn’t see Megatron after Optimus was shot.”

“I will take your word for it,” said Sumdac. “I can only see Optimus’s grief, and I find it remarkable that anyone could love Megatron so much. Be careful of him, please. That kind of grief is not something you recover from; it is something you survive.”

“He isn’t the only one.”

Sumdac looked around the hospital. “Yes,” he said. “I had that impression.” He looked up at Ratchet. “Take care of yourself, too.”

Ratchet gave him a small smile. “I will.”

---

Strika leaned against the doorjamb, and the door beeped irritably, trying to close, then stopping. Autobot doors. She rolled her optics. A decent Decepticon door would have shut on her, or simply not done so...and either way, it would have been silent. “Shockwave. A word.”

Shockwave looked up at her from his desk. She removed herself from the door, to its evidence relief, then leaned on it once it was closed. No beeping this time, good. “Our intelligence seems to have been lacking.”

“Really,” said Shockwave.

Strika folded her arms. “An entire plague, Shockwave. The energon shortage. How did your people *miss* those?”

“They did not.”

“I thought so.”

Shockwave looked up at her. “Are you expecting an apology?”

“An explanation, first. Reasons not to bring it to Optimus’s attention.”

“You have already identified my primary reason.”

“Optimus.”

Shockwave nodded. “Optimus. The only way to end the war was to attack, and attack decisively. Would Optimus have been capable of doing that if he’d known of the plague? There was a possibility that he would, but also a possibility that his innate sense of honor and nobility would have prevented the victory we needed. There would have been no question with you or with Megatron, but with Optimus...”

“You could not trust him.”

“No. I could not. We needed the decisive victory. I did not want that endangered. So I withheld information.”

Strika hummed low in her vocalizer, thinking.

“Your first loyalty is to your Lord,” she said at last.

“No,” said Shockwave. “My first loyalty is to the Decepticon Cause.” He looked thoughtful. “I suppose that would be all of Cybertron, now. But my first loyalty is not to a single mech, but to what that mech serves. Thinking otherwise leads to things like Megazarak.”

“Indeed,” said Strika. “You did not tell me.”

“I did not.”

“Why?”

His optic narrowed thoughtfully again. “Where is your first loyalty, General? Or, more appropriately, where *was* your first loyalty? You killed Tarn, for Optimus. You killed Overlord, for Optimus. You altered Lord Megatron’s will, for Optimus. Indeed, you even arranged their bonding. Do you see why these things might lead me to...question...where your first loyalty lay?”

Strika’s servos clenched. “How did you know that?”

Shockwave’s optic flicked to the side. “The will? You covered your tracks well, but I have the more experience. I...did what I could to ensure no one else would know. I believe you made the right decision.”

"I don't need justification from you."

"Do you?" It was reasonable. Nonthreatening. Strika had to suppress a snarl.

"You can see why there was question in my processor as to your first loyalty, General. Do not dissemble; yours has always been to Megatron, not our Cause. When Megatron offlined, where did that leave you? With his young, injured mate the only possible replacement for him. It was only logical that you would adopt him in Megatron's place. This is what I expected. I acted accordingly."

*Yours has always been to Megatron, not our Cause.*

Strika did snarl at that. Shockwave's antennae canted back, very slightly, and she wanted to rip them out of his helm. Not because he had presumed...but because there was no way she could deny it. She tried, a first great tide of anger and denial, but she knew it was false even as she thought it, she knew that her rage was unjust, and that made it worse.

"My apologies if I have spoken out of turn," said Shockwave.

"My consort's distaste for you was merited," growled Strika. She glanced away, a deferent gesture she otherwise would not make, enough of an admission of his accuracy in itself.

"No doubt," said Shockwave. "He did very little without merit." He looked at her, really looked, and she shifted her mass uncomfortably. It wasn't pleasant to be scrutinized by Shockwave, but this time there was something kind about it.

"General, take some time for yourself," he said. "We are at peace. There are other people to handle the workload. There is no reason not to be kind to yourself, no weakness in it. Optimus is wounded, and you grant him mercy, as much as he will allow you to. Do you think him weak for it?"

"No," she snapped.

"Do not think yourself weak, then."

"Since when are you this tactful?"

His optic irised in reset. "A useful tactic for a spy. I train all my operatives in tact. It is, however, a program that requires significant resource allocation, and often I opt to disable it for efficiency of processing."

It startled a snort out of her. "So while you're running your tact program, what about Optimus?"

"He may require reassurance. He has tried to become a Decepticon of Megatron's caliber, yet his battle with Sentinel went badly. He may feel he is not worthy, or angry that he did not manage to dispatch Sentinel more efficiently. May I disable the program now? I was calculating exchange rates."

"Go ahead," said Strika. She turned to the door. "I will speak with Optimus."

## Chapter 72

When Alpha Trion at last made an appearance, he brought a sword with him. It was anyone's guess about how he'd gotten it past Strika or Ratchet.

Optimus looked up from the datapad he was perusing, and looked at the shrouded object in Alpha Trion's servos. He hastily hauled himself upright. "Alpha Trion, sir, welcome. My apologies—"

Alpha Trion held up a servo, and placed the sword on the berth. Optimus's optics fixed on it as the cover was withdrawn. "Sentinel wanted it melted," the older bot said. "I could not allow such harm to befall such an artifact."

Curious mecha started drifting over, but Optimus's attention was focused on what was in front of him. He reached for it, stopped himself, and just looked. "Megatron's sword." The grief squeezed his spark, all at once, and he reset his vocalizer several times in quick succession to clear the static from it before speaking again. "Thank you, Alpha Trion. It—it means a lot, to even have this much."

"Megatron's sword?" said Alpha Trion, sounding rather taken aback. "This is the sword of Solus Prime, the Star Saber."

Optimus stared at him.

"She never bore it," said Alpha Trion, "but as its smith, it was hers above anyone else."

Optimus pulled his servo away from it, his plating prickling. "Megatron was carrying it a long while," he said.

"Where he found it would be a question I'd much like to ask him in person," said Alpha Trion. "It has been lost for eons. But perhaps it found him. It knew where it would be needed, where it might find you."

Optimus looked down at the sword, then back at Alpha Trion. "Why would you say that?" he asked, quietly.

Alpha Trion gave him a very small, serene smile in return. "Do not be afraid to touch it," he said.

Optimus looked down at the sword. "I do not think I am worthy," he said.

Alpha Trion looked at him, then at their silent audience, craning for a glimpse of the sword. "Are you?"

Optimus found himself reaching along the familiar pathways of his spark for something that wasn't here. He offlined his optics. "Megatron was."

Surprise flickered in Alpha Trion's optics, then amusement. "Perhaps," he said, and began to wrap the sword again. "If you ever feel it appropriate, I will have this."

"Thank you," said Optimus, not sure what he was thanking the older mech for. "It is a part of our history, and deserves protection."

Alpha Trion nodded, gathered the sword and wrappings up, and took his leave.

Optimus settled back to his reading, pinching his nasal guard. His optics seemed to skip away from the page, and a strange diffuse grief filled his spark, making it difficult to concentrate. His servos

shook.

The shock of reaching across the bond and finding nothing there rang throughout his frame. He put down the datapad, and rose, trying to make it look like he'd just had an idea, and strode away in search of privacy.

It was harder to find than expected. He ended up in a cupboard with cleaning supplies, shut the door, curled around himself and shook.

After a while, he let himself keen, tiny, static-laced sobs. He didn't know how he could hurt so and yet live, he didn't know he'd managed so long not doing this. He keened, fighting to keep it quiet, because somehow making noise distracted from the pain. He pinched at his audials again, almost reflexive, and the physical pain of that made it better, somehow. It was better than not doing it.

Footsteps. The door to his cupboard popped open. He froze, humiliation washing over him on top of the pain.

Strika looked down at him. Had she come looking for him? Had she *heard* him? Did everyone know?

"Where is the 10% nitric acid solution?" she asked. "The print on these bottles is too small."

Optimus uncurled himself and looked on automatic for the bottle. He found it, rose to hand it over.

"Thank you," said Strika. "Door open or closed? I will give this to Ratchet, then return."

"Closed," he managed, and she nodded, tucked the Autobot-sized bottle under an elbow, and was gone.

He was abruptly deeply grateful. He didn't know if he could have borne her concern, or any remark on his condition. She would be returning, she'd been courteous enough to tell him that much. He leaned his helm on his knees and focused on venting, getting himself some semblance of dignity.

The door opened again.

"A little of your time, my lord?" said Strika, extending a servo.

He hesitated, then took it. "Thank you."

"You're not alone," said Strika, and drew him to his stabilizers. "There is a conference room this way."

He followed her, all too conscious of the slip in his behavior, feeling guilty for his misery. The door whisked open and she stood in it, holding it open for him while it beeped angrily. He entered, sat.

"There's a movement to make you Magnus," she said. "Not only our people; a lot of former Autobots. They want to appoint you, and have done with it. No more Council. If you're a viable candidate to the Primacy, they want you to take that as well."

"Interim only," he said.

Strika shook her helm. "No. Not for the interim. They want you to take power, and have done with it."

Optimus shook his helm. "I cannot do that," he said. "That would be wrong beyond belief. That goes against everything we fought for."

“Perhaps,” said Strika. “Ratchet and I agree that you should be presented with the Matrix as soon as possible. As soon as Alpha Trion finds it, that is; it appears the Autobots attempted to hide it before their government fell.”

Optimus just looked at her.

“We can have these ‘elections’ of yours later,” she explained. “But for now, we need a Prime. It’ll ally the Autobots behind you when we most need strength.”

“No,” said Optimus. “No. We cannot.”

“It’s worth trying,” said Strika. “We need unquestionable leadership, now more than ever.”

“No,” said Optimus again.

Strika’s optics narrowed. “Do you think I am in jest, Optimus?” she said, and there was a very dangerous edge to her voice. “Our King Rat is still out there. They cannot be allowed to gain power; we *need* the authority of a Prime, now more than ever. Your duty is to find a way to keep them from hurting your people, and you are allowing false humility to endanger them. Become Prime. Set up your utopian government. But at least *attempt* to secure that security first!”

Optimus started back, amazed and hurt by her forcefulness. Then he looked away. “I’m sorry,” he said in a small voice. “I...I do not think I am a very good leader, particularly now. There is much to do, and I have done very little of it. And my ability in battle is not what a Prime’s should be.”

There, he’d said it, and he looked up at Strika with dread in his spark, because she would not be gentle with him about this.

“Very few of us have done more than ‘little’ of what needs to be done,” she said, “but you have done most of all of us. Primus below, little one, you’ve saved us all, and as for your prowess in battle, all of us are occasionally fools, and with less excuse than you. You defeated Sentinel in the end, and that is enough. You are a warrior, but a small one, and one who prefers strategy, and there is no shame in that. And you are attempting to fight with half your frame missing.”

He stared at her, startled.

“You are accustomed to fighting with Megatron,” she said. “You expect, on a spark-deep level, to be in two places at once. You cannot do this anymore, and so your recent battles have gone badly. But still, you defeated Sentinel.”

He looked away. “I was stupid.”

“Yes,” she said. “If I’d seen him, I would have been far stupider. It’s done. You’re still here. That’s all that matters. Regretting it won’t change anything.” She thumped him on the back. “That said, Ratchet’s releasing you. Come on, I’ve got quarters for us. He mentioned that you prefer to have housemates.”

---

The quarters were with Bumblebee and Bulkhead and Ratchet—and Strika. They consisted of five rooms spaced out around a central gathering and energon preparation area. There wasn’t much in the entirety other than berths and an energon dispenser, none of the friendliness of the base on Earth.

Optimus found himself wishing for some road signs to pin up on the walls.

It was hastily erected, too. It seemed fairly solid, except for the one plate of decking that caused the energon dispenser to bounce if you trod on it carelessly, and the glitchmice that got in everywhere, evidently having decided that since mecha had given them the place for a short time, it was theirs forever.

Somehow, Earth spiders had managed to hitchhike in the equipment Sumdac sent, and Optimus was determined to find out how once he finished smashing every last one of the revolting things. Ratchet didn't give a frag about them, and Strika more often than not couldn't see them; at least Bumblebee and Bulkhead made themselves useful.

Things settled down. It was nice to have people around, he supposed. It was somewhat soothing, even Bulkhead and Bumblebee getting into trouble.

He still set up an office in the hospital. It was the only good, structurally stable administrative building they had.

Even better, the issue of the Matrix seemed to be forgotten after his conversation with Strika.

That was, at least, until Ratchet accosted him one evening on his way home, Strika tailing them, and said, "Alpha Trion found it."

"Found what?"

"You know. We're meeting him in one of the tunnels below the archives. It'll give us some privacy. Come on."

It had to be the Matrix. Optimus's tanks lurched, but he followed anyway.

The tunnel was an ugly scramble down, one that made Optimus's injured leg ache in protest, and then they stood in an open space far below the surface, a great shadowed space only dimly hinted at in the light of their optics.

"Ah. Optimus," said Alpha Trion's voice in that darkness. "This should be presented with greater ceremony, but tonight, we are sorely pressed for time."

A shuffle of metalmesh on metal, and light blazed forth from the thing Alpha Trion held. Strika shielded her optics. Ratchet grumbled and stepped behind him.

Optimus took a step forward. The light seemed friendly, welcoming, and did not hurt. He moved to meet Alpha Trion, looked down at the thing he held in his servos.

Alpha Trion released it and stepped back. It didn't fall, hovered before Optimus at spark-height, and he felt his chestplates fold back of their own accord. Comfort washed over him, the feeling of profound rightness, and for a moment the pain of Megatron's death subsided, subsumed by joy and a feeling of welcome.

He'd never been particularly religious, and now the ceremony and the posturing and the religious strictures seemed all the sillier to him, because the entity that brushed his spark through the Matrix was supremely unconcerned with such things. Joy in life, such a great joy that grief burned away before it, insignificant, joy in creation, a sense of something huge and alien and kind, so, so, kind, and it withdrew, and then it was just the Matrix there, something smaller but distinct from that other entity, evaluating, controlled rather than that wild unfettered joy.



It hesitated before him. Optimus realized that he stood with his spark bared, with Alpha Trion and Ratchet and Strika looking at him, and felt no shame. He pulsed acceptance at the thing before him, felt his frame nod, a reflex, and the Matrix moved into him.

He gasped when it touched his spark, nothing like the feeling of another's spark, and then the world drifted away, the rubble-strewn tunnel vanishing.

*Welcome, Optimus Prime.*

The Matrix's voice hissed around him, like a wind driving an electrical storm, wild and fey and purposeful.

*Be always welcome. It is time for you to make your choice. I accept you, but it is your choice.*

Optimus squared his shoulders, not sure if they were dream or reality, and not caring. "I am ready."

*This is not the end of a journey. Rather, a beginning, as it was for all your counterparts, in all their universes.*

And he was standing not in the Primal Basilica but in another room on another world. Around him were mecha who looked somewhat Cybertronian.

"Orion Pax," said a voice far above him. "*Do you accept the Primacy?*"

"*I do,*" he heard himself answer, a different voice, and behind him someone rumbled in rage and he turned to see blue optics blazing with fury and betrayal, a face that something in him recognized as Megatron.

"*Megatronus—no, let me explain!*" the voice that was not his called, but Megatronus was already snarling defiance up at the Council around him.

Things shifted and now his servo was on a lever, and he wanted nothing more than to stop Megatron talking, stop him now, *hurt* him for what he'd said, what he'd done, with a terrible fury that he'd never felt before.

He stood before the Primal Basilica now, and Megatron stood with him, another strange mech but one his spark recognized as Megatron, and he smiled at his brother. Prime and Protector, as things should be, and together they would return their dark little world to the light, to fuel for all, no more guttering sparks. But Megatron looked back at him, and there was something wrong in the strange faceplates. He reached after his brother, but Megatron turned his back on him, and swept away, and something in their shared spark whispered hatred, anger, and he could not understand why.

He stood on a blasted plain, the Star Saber was heavy in his servos. He knew what he had to do, and raised the blade above his helm, brought it down on the one thing that could restore Cybertron, the one hope for their species, for their survival, and knew he was killing them as he did it, and knew he could do nothing else.

Strika bore down on them and he tasted terror like he never had before, and the part of him that watched recoiled at how very *wrong* she was, at the crazed hatred in every line of her frame.

"*Well done,*" he said, releasing the cuffs on Megatron's wrists. "*You leave tomorrow.*" Megatron would not look at him, and he seemed small, diminished, optics dim, shoulders slumped. Defeated, he realized. He had never seen Megatron look so defeated, and even when Megatron said, "*If I was the person I used to be, I swear I'd—*" there was no real venom to it. When he left, he pretended he hadn't seen Megatron sink his helm into his hands and shudder. *Have I broken him?* he wondered,

the thought by itself terribly wrong.

*“Optimus, we needed that!”* Another Ratchet, his voice breaking, and a terrible grief in his optics that was only a fraction of his own. He knew what he needed to do now, and it was a relief, death was a relief.

His voice choking out static-laced denials, and Sentinel bore down on him and Megatron laughed, and he wasn’t sure which was the source of the terrible grief and betrayal.

Unicron’s spark blazed before him and he stepped forward, unhooking his chestplates. He knew he would not return, that it would take a miracle. *I hope Ratchet is ready.*

Megatron seized the Matrix and wrenched. Optimus heard himself scream, with the agony, the wrongness, and he could do nothing. To the part of him that still watched, the hatred in Megatron’s optics hurt still worse.

Megatron stepped forward, offered peace, red optics a dim, banked glow. Suspicion rose in him, and he struck, saw the flash of shock and disbelief in those optics before his axe clove Megatron’s helm, felt his brother die in his spark as he wrenched. Connectors split, plating cracked, and he dragged Megatron’s helm from his shoulders. A fitting price, for the stench of death around them, for what he had done to the humans.

*“Optronix. Optronix, I know you can hear me. Don’t let it do this to you. You’re not a murderer. Optronix, please!”* Megatron, terrified. He looked down into blue optics and laughed as he ground the outstretched servo under his stabilizer. Megatron screamed.

He clung to the side of some great structure, and looked down as Megatron’s darkened frame fell, spark split by the Star Saber, and when Bumblebee offered him a servo up, something in him wondered about letting go, instead.

*Make your choice,* said the Matrix.

Optimus found himself back in his frame, his servos clean. “It’s not a choice, is it,” he said to the Matrix. “You know I will not accept this. You show me this Optimus I will become...but he is not what my world needs today, is he?”

*Perhaps he is. Perhaps he is not. I do not tell the future. I can only tell you what has happened to the other versions of Optimus when he accepted my burden.*

“I will not. I will not be that Optimus.” He felt the crunch of Megatron’s helm reverberating up the haft clutched in his servos and shuddered. “I will not lead us to war again. I cannot risk it; Cybertron is wounded, badly wounded.”

*It is your choice.* It paused. *Send the true Prime to me when you find them.*

And he came undone, found himself on the floor, steam pouring from him and Ratchet demanding, frightened.

“It’s all right,” he said. “Ratchet I’m fine.”

“That was a lot of screaming for *fine*,” said Strika.

“I uh,” Optimus looked up at the Matrix. “I...” He looked to Alpha Trion, who stood there with shock plain on his faceplates. He set his jaw, and put a servo on Ratchet’s shoulder, allowed himself to be pulled upright. After a moment he shut his chestplates. “Optimus Prime is not the mech this

world needs,” he said. “I do not want to start another war. Every time some version of me has, another war starts.”

“War,” grumbled Strika, “we can deal with.”

“Not like this,” said Optimus. “That war would kill Cybertron. The planet itself. We would be reduced to refugees.” He shuddered as a particularly horrible memory came back to him. “Hunted for parts. Melted, the metals of our bodies more worthwhile than our sparks or our suffering. And Megatron would die at my servos.” He shuddered again. He didn’t think he’d be able to use his axe for a long, long time. “It accepted me. I could not accept it.”

“We’ll say it can’t bond again,” said Ratchet. “We’d better not let this get out. It’d undermine opinion pretty thoroughly. Get his arm.”

“Got it. Can you walk?”

“Yeah. Yeah. Just fine.” He looked at Alpha Trion again, managed a small smile. “I think I’d make a better Magnus, really.”

Alpha Trion looked down at the Matrix in his servos. “Perhaps,” he said, regaining his composure. “There are many possibilities.”

“And I’ve made my choice,” said Optimus. He looked at the Matrix again, and knew, without a doubt, that this was the right thing to do.

In an odd way, that was more comforting than anything else could have been.

## Chapter 73

“Elections first. Then we try Sentinel,” said Optimus. He bent back to work, glad of the screen’s larger size. The document that the humans had termed the Cybertronian Constitution (he’d had to have that one explained, then decided to stick with the name) was growing rapidly. Optimus was glad of the legal help of the other contributors, and Strongarm was proving absolutely indispensable.

Strika grumbled.

“If we do it any other way, we run the risk of being accused of trying him in a hopping court.”

“Kangaroo,” said Strongarm, alternating between a datapad and her own workstation screen. She’d finished with the Galactic Council charter several days ago, and was now working on Earth documents. “This one has a stipulation that the government can’t board troops in a citizen’s home without fair compensation. That sounds good, right?”

Optimus peered over her shoulder. “Yes, I think that’s good. I like the bit about unwarranted searches and seizures, too.”

“You’ve already put that in,” said Strongarm. “And tried to put it in another five times. I think we’re covered on that front. We need to start thinking about how we’re actually going to manage to *have* a fair election.”

“Outside observers?” suggested Jazz, from across the room. The makeshift command center was just that, extremely makeshift, but comfortable as such things went. “I suggest the humans.”

“Of course you suggest the humans,” grumbled Strika. “Favorite species of Autobots everywhere.”

“We do know them best,” said Optimus. “Jazz, contact Earth and make inquiries.”

“Will do.”

“We’ll leave it open to multiple candidates,” said Optimus. “Even those imprisoned; people will accuse us of running a one-party state, and those don’t tend to preserve liberty very well at all.”

“Neither do two-party states,” Strongarm pointed out. “You get two groups opposing each other for the sake of opposing each other, with little concern for the people themselves.”

“You’re getting ahead of yourselves,” said Strika. “And do you *really* want Sentinel able to run? He’s a war criminal. He’s slaughtered millions through his stupidity. You might as well not have fought the fragging *war!*”

“But we won’t turn into Sentinel,” said Optimus. “We can’t afford that.”

“He has very little chance of winning, and we can’t deny him his rights before he stands trial,” Strongarm pointed out. She looked away. “As much as I’d like to.”

“We all would, I think,” said Optimus. “Come on, back to work.”

---

The election was surprisingly straightforward. Optimus won by, as the humans put it, 'a landslide'. Optimus's opponent was a former Chief Justice, who, after the last war, had retired to a life of academic study. He was not well known, and his somewhat more conservative policies sat very ill indeed with a populace wary of any return to Sentinel's policies. For his part, Optimus found his opponent reasonable, for all their disagreements, and hoping to change his mind over time, instated him as a legal advisor to his administration.

For Optimus himself, with the minor hiccup of a very modest inauguration, it meant very little change in his daily life. The results of the election concerned him—he certainly didn't want to be a dictator!—but he supposed that once he started making serious decisions, some sort of opposition would arise.

Over the next orns, Iacon rebuilt itself. The Primal Basilica became functional again, and one of Optimus's first actions was to open it to the public, the Matrix, Allspark, and Star Saber on display for anyone who wished to see them. Their shared history was the right of all Cybertronians.

Government offices were restored, and within six orns, Optimus had his own version of the Magnus's office; no larger than any other senior official, and its size driven entirely by the number of visitors he needed to be able to talk to at a time. Strika, appointed General of all of Cybertron's forces, had a rather larger office next door.

Parts of the constitution were still being written, especially the provisions in case Cybertron ever did have another Prime, limiting it to a largely spiritual and advisory role, with no decision-making power behind it. Optimus doubted Cybertron was ever going to be ready for a full separation of church and state, however fond the humans were of the idea.

Energion mines opened again. It was hard to persuade people to voluntarily engage in such difficult, dangerous work. He assigned D-494 and a team of engineers to work out new safety plans, allocated funds to ensure that miners were paid as highly as medics, and had access to skilled, effective medical care. Jazz came up with incentives for supervisors to have as few accidents as possible in their sections.

It was only one of many areas that needed complete reform. Optimus and his teams slogged patiently through them. They weren't sure how well their solutions were going to work, but all they could do was try. They fixed things as best they could as the issues arose. Not making it functional wasn't an option.

No opposition arose from the 'King Rat', or at least none that Optimus could immediately detect. They worked hard, they barely recharged, and around them, the Cybertronian Commonwealth slowly returned to its former glory.

Strika was concerned by what would happen when they ran out of work to do, but there was so fragging *much* of it that even she conceded it would be at least a decade before they had the problem of bored warframes. Optimus granted her the concession of keeping a powerful, well-funded military on servo... and then Ratchet pointed out that the Galactic Council might think rather better of them if they had an organization that could be retooled into a powerful disaster relief aid, able to be deployed anywhere within the Commonwealth or to their allies. The humans put in that some Earth superpowers had militaries that could serve in such a capacity, and the pitfalls involved. Optimus and Strika went back to the drawing board, whenever anything else would allow them the time to do so.

He was walking home from one of those discussions, Strika having elected to stay considerably later than was usual, to consult with Ratchet on something or other. It was nice walking through the rebuilt streets, a time when everyone wasn't clamoring at him to fix various difficulties, and he took a circuitous route, through allies and back ways, looking around and appreciating the way the city

lights fell over the structures around him, the evidence of a power grid finally stabilized and fueled with enough energon to avoid the rolling black-outs he remembered as a staple of his early function.

And something dropped on him from the top of a building.

His first panicked thought was *Blackarachnia*? because there were a *lot* of limbs involved, but this bot was different, bigger. They were trying to fasten one of them to his helm. Optimus snapped a grappler to the first limb he could reach and jolted electricity through it.

The bot yelled and let go of him. He struggled to his feet, sized the Magnus Hammer from where it had fallen, and slammed it into the bot as they leapt at him.

His attacker snarled, scrambled upright. “Stop resisting, Magnus! You’ll damage yourself.”

He finally got a good look at his attacker, a large femme with a number of auxiliary limbs that looked like a medic’s data-cables, a number of exchangeable lenses for her optics. “Trepan?”

The bot dragged the back of a servo over her intake, leaving a smudge of energon. “There’s not a lot of bots who know that name,” she said. “Where did you learn it?”

“Doesn’t matter,” said Optimus, and slid his battlemask out.

“You’re right. I’ll find out anyway.”

“No you won’t,” said Optimus, and reached for the charge within the Hammer.

The bolt of lighting set all of his plating on edge, the itchy greasy feel of a large atmospheric discharge all around him, and knocked Trepan helm over stabilizers. Her connectors spat sparks and smoke, and she shrieked, all of them tucking in tight to her frame at once. She turned to run.

He brought her down in a flying tackle. “Your leader isn’t going to get Cybertron back,” he said. “Not while I function. Not while Strika functions. Not while any of us who survived the war function! Do you think we don’t know you exist?”

Claws dug into his wrist and wrenched, and a sudden wave of terror made his grip slacken. She squirmed out from under him, kicked him in the faceplate. He dodged another blow that would have flattened him, grabbed the Hammer and took a step back, raising it.

“This is not your world anymore, and you won’t use me like you used Sentinel,” he said.

She looked at him, at the Hammer, snarled and fled.

He lowered the Hammer and activated his comms. “Strika, Ratchet, I want security on all our people heightened. I was just attacked by someone I think was Trepan.”

Strika was the first to respond. “*You were. We just found Sentinel dead in his cell.*”

---

Even if the guard had sounded the alarm the moment after Trepan departed, Ratchet couldn’t have done anything for Sentinel.

His drives had been wiped.

Completely. Autonomic coding as well. His frame had lost its instructions for how to function. His vents stopped working, and sealed themselves closed. Thermoregulators had clicked off, one after another. Osmotic pressure alone pulled the fuel through his lines, the tiny chemical reactions as it seeped through his components creating tiny quantities of heat. And his spark kept beating all the while.

But without vents, without ventilations, without thermoregulators, that heat built up.

He'd effectively roasted in his own plating over the course of megacycles.

It was not a nice way to go. Trapped, without input, without comprehension, only emotion, as it got hotter, and hotter, fear and silence his only companions.

It actually made Ratchet shudder.

From the outside, it would have only looked like recharge. Perfectly peaceful, until the smoke began seeping from his joints and vents.

Ratchet had only gotten the call once that happened, and Sentinel was gone by the time he arrived.

*Couldn't have happened to a nicer guy, he thought, but still...!*

He eavesdropped on Strika's comm, then started sending the orders to heighten security. The war was over, but the fight was far from done.

## Chapter 74

### Chapter Notes

I HIGHLY recommend Spectre Induction from the Mass Effect soundtrack as the theme for the last section of this chapter.

You'll know which last section I'm talking about when you get to it. :)

The only result the heightened security had was that it annoyed everyone.

Trepan vanished into the shadows as if she'd never existed. Megazarak made no ill-judged reappearance, and the King Rat, whoever they were, stayed firmly out of sight.

They dealt with Sentinel's body with the dignity due to any Cybertronian citizen, and settled to dealing with the fallout as best they could. It wasn't good. The fact that a prisoner had offlined while in government custody had people throwing around unpleasant words like *assassination* and *extrajudicial murder*.

Ironic, in a way, that Sentinel had managed with his death to do more damage to Optimus's government than he could have hoped to in life.

Optimus sighed, and approved investigations into his murder, and made the results publicly available. He also funded expeditions into the labyrinth of corridors and tunnels throughout Cybertron, ostensibly to reclaim them, but really in the hopes of catching Trepan and her associates.

There were no results.

Cybertron began to look less like it was in recovery, and more like a functioning planet.

Six solar cycles after the war ended, the first batch of protoforms since Sentinel's defeat were brought online.

Optimus and the others had put great thought into how to structure the onlining process so the new members of their society would have the greatest choice possible in their future lives, and they watched with anxiety as the newest generation took their first tentative steps into this new Cybertron, the first generation to have a full choice in what they would do with their function.

And unlike the anxieties generations of Autobots had voiced, the new generation seemed to have little difficulty with those choices. No one went mad. No one glitched from fear or confusion. They sampled everything, and decided—or in some cases, didn't decide, and did more than one thing.

It was...difficult to believe the evidence of his own optics, Optimus thought, watching them. After so many years being told what they couldn't do, to see it disproved in front of him was incredible.

Across from him, on the newly installed seating of their shared quarters, Strika read the reports, then laughed aloud, disbelief and wonder, and put them aside. She looked at him with real wonder in her optics.

"He would be proud," she said. "And startled. We hoped for this, but I very much doubt if we



thought it would be possible. But you did it.”

Optimus felt himself flush hot with pleasure at the praise. “I only…”

“No I only,” said Strika, her tone going dead serious. “I never thought I’d live to see this. That any of us would. Accept the damned compliment, Optimus.”

Optimus reset his optics and obeyed.

Several weeks after the first expedition left, there was the first result.

Swindle, on the run since Decepticon agents discovered he’d been running businesses on Autobot-controlled Cybertron, had been apprehended. Since the end of the war, those charges had of course been dropped… but there were a number of intergalactic charges he had yet to answer for, and there was a distinct possibility he might have useful information. Optimus requested he come in for a consultation.

Swindle, from the sound of it, mistook ‘a consultation’ for ‘questioning’. Optimus listened to the sound of his protests (and desires for ‘fair recompense’) down the hall and groaned, pinching the bridge of his nasal guard. That was going to help the people’s trust. Quite a lot. Even if the guards were making it quite clear—at the top of their vocalizers—that the whole thing was voluntary.

Strika looked at the door as well. “Primus, what a dipstick.”

Optimus almost nodded agreement. He repressed the very Megatron-like urge to throttle the arms dealer as he was brought in, and flicked a servo at the enforcers to dismiss them.

Strika folded her arms. “This is not an interrogation,” she told Swindle, in a tone of such menace that he quailed despite her words. “The war is over. You have committed no crimes under the current Cybertronian legal code; we have no authority to prosecute you.”

Swindle looked at both of them, and smiled. Optimus’s plating prickled uncomfortably; he didn’t like that smile. It was very much the same smile he’d seen on Swindle while he described how helpless and fully aware they’d all be to whatever horrors Megatron chose to inflict on them—an expression that hinted that, if Megatron didn’t care to inflict any horrors, he’d be pleased to step up to the task.

“Oh?” he said. “Then perhaps a business meeting?”

“Indeed,” said Strika. Swindle’s grin widened. Optimus got the abrupt impression that Swindle was exactly where he wanted to be, and was seeing one frag of a profit in his immediate future.

“Oh, good,” he said. “You know, I must admit that I’m rather disappointed in your Intelligence division, Optimus Magnus. I was expecting them to find out I had it several orns ago.”

“Several orns ago?” said Optimus. “Are you sure it’s current?”

Swindle gave him a very odd look. “Why would it need to be current? It’s a corpse. It’s as un-current as it gets.”

Optimus stared at him. “You mean to say you don’t have information about where Trepan’s hiding?”

“A corpse?” said Strika, at the same time.

“Trepan? Who’s Trepan?” said Swindle.

They looked at each other. A thick silence settled, as all of them realized they’d been carrying a

cogent conversation about two entirely different topics.

“You don’t know who Trepan is,” said Optimus.

“Nooo,” said Swindle, drawing out the syllable. “Is that why you wanted to ‘consult’ with me?”

“Yes,” said Strika.

“And you don’t know why I’m here,” said Swindle, with care, and at their silence, looked even more smug.

*Used car dealer*, Optimus thought, remembering the appropriate Earth term for that expression, one that had originally translated to Neocybex simply as *pimp*. Professor Sumdac had been rather taken aback when he first used the term at the widespread horror it had caused among the visiting Cybertronians; Ratchet had even gone so far as to slap his servos over Bumblebee’s audials. (Bumblebee was already thoroughly dissolute; it was Bulkhead who would have appreciated it, but since no one save Optimus—who was on the other side of the room at the time—could reach his audials, he had to fend for himself.)

“Perhaps you would like to explain,” he said aloud, allowing an edge to creep into his voice. Swindle, fortunately for him, took notice at that, reset his vocalizer with an audible click, and then, because he was still Swindle, leaned conspiratorially over the desk and looked both of them in the optics.

“I have Megatron’s body,” he said.

Optimus very slowly lowered his datapad to the desk, and looked at Swindle. “You’re joking.”

“Nope.” Optimus wasn’t sure if he was delighted, or if he wanted to punch the grin off of Swindle’s faceplate, because this was *Megatron’s fragging corpse* he was gloating about. A quick glance at Strika found her with narrowed optics, servos flexing. “How much will you pay for it?”

“Optimus Magnus was Lord Megatron’s conjunx,” said Strika, a warning rumble. “He had right of sepulcher. Legally, you may not charge him for the body.”

“Do you know how much trouble I went through to get that body?” demanded Swindle. “And I only got it by very good luck. I was running a waste disposal company! For the prisons! And it was only because I was very, very careful that your conjunx’s body didn’t get to the smelting pit it was scheduled for. I had to flee Cybertron because of it! So no, I won’t charge you for the body...but I sure as Pit am owed delivery fees!”

“How do we know it’s real?” said Strika.

“Come see for yourself,” said Swindle. The twist of his intake went sour. “It should be with the rest of my confiscated goods.”

Optimus looked up at Strika. “General, could you...”

Strika bowed her helm. “Yes, Magnus. Swindle, show me.”

He waited until they were gone before he sat abruptly behind his desk, shaking.

At least he was going to get the body. He tried to cling to that, but it brought home Megatron’s death all over again, and he hunched around himself, trembling, and waited. He didn’t know if he could bear it if it was a fake. He didn’t know if he could bear it if it were real. All he could do was sit and

wait for Strika to return.

---

It was perfectly genuine, and it made Strika's spark sink. She needed very little time to verify that. But how would Optimus deal with this? He'd held up well enough, occupied and distracted, but this might shake him out of it. It likely *would* shake him out of it, out of the ability to distract himself from the grief, put it aside until it was something that wouldn't destroy him. She sent a quick ping to Ratchet to watch out for Optimus as well as possible because this... this would not allow him to distract himself. Primus, it hurt her spark just looking. She didn't think *she* could bear to see Lugnut in similar condition.

She paid Swindle, and had the body moved to another storeroom so she might be alone. She didn't know how long she could control herself.

Megatron had not left a peaceful corpse.

The slack faceplates still somehow held an expression of anger, under all the old cracks and the gray of death. With good reason.

Strika prayed Optimus wasn't experienced enough to identify all the little signs of abuse she could, the scuffs, the tiny burns between joints, the flakes of paint and metal still clinging to his claws. Some of that was his own, where he must have clenched them so hard they drew energon, gouged his palms. The metal of his intake dimpled over missing dentae.

It was too much to hope that Optimus would miss the electrowhip weals, testimony to many savage beatings—some had even begun to heal before he offlined. Others hadn't. The dents.

There'd been a lot of work done to make sure those didn't show in the footage of his murder; she could still see the residue of cheap fillers and paints in the wounds, where they'd been applied with purely cosmetic intent to the still-open wounds. That would have been agonizing in itself.

There weren't a lot of ways to die well, and it was all too abundantly clear Megatron hadn't. It broke her spark to see him so reduced, a pitiable corpse. He would have hated it.

Terminus would have hated it. After all they'd been through together, after all they'd fought for, she'd let his bonded offline alone among enemies, tormented, humiliated, helpless. He hadn't been able to even bite them, at the end.

"I'm sorry, my lord," she said aloud. Then she could bear it no longer.

For the first time in her long function, General Strika fled in shame, abandoning a comrade.

---

*"It's genuine,"* said Strika's voice over his comms. *"Optimus, I..."*

She trailed off.

Dread settled in his tanks. It had to be bad. "I want to see him," he said aloud, and stood up, moving

like someone in a dream.

“Yes, my lord,” said Strika quietly, and that too was bad. He pushed it out of processor and went.

All too soon, the door was in front of him, and Strika next to it, saying something he didn’t quite hear. He shook his helm at her, and went in anyway.

He looked at what was on the anti-grav flat, and sat down hard.

It wasn’t Megatron, was his first thought. It couldn’t be. Megatron was always so, so, active, powerful, *alive*. This...thing just lay there, still and gray, and worn with time. It couldn’t be Megatron.

“Optimus,” said Strika. She tried to raise him to his stabilizers. He shook his helm.

“Give me time,” he managed. She stepped back. “Alone.”

“Are you sure...”

“Let me say goodbye,” he said. He didn’t mean it. But it was the right thing to say to make her leave.

He bowed his helm. He wasn’t sure what exactly he was feeling, grief, anger, pain, but whatever it was, it was dreadful. He sat and vented, and thought about Megatron as he had been. Not about the thing on the anti-grav flat in front of him.

If he’d accepted the Matrix, he wondered, would he have been able to save Megatron?

He curled around himself with hurt at the thought, with the horrible memory of the crunch of Megatron’s helm vibrating up the hilt of his axe. No. Taking the Matrix seemed always to lead to Megatron’s death. He couldn’t have done that, even if Megatron’s death had come first.

He wasn’t a Prime. He wasn’t made to be a Prime. He didn’t *want* to be Prime—and from his brief time touching the Matrix, he knew none of his counterparts had wanted it either. They’d accepted out of fear, desperation, unwillingly to save worlds.

He thought about that last one, about the sudden jolt of life and coming awake in sand and gasping confusion with the ghost of Megatron’s blade in his spark, and finding himself again in a battle, corpse-components lashed hastily to him—*stop the Fallen!*

He didn’t want to be the closest connection the Cybertronian people had to Primus. He’d felt Primus’s presence, but didn’t want to live in it. A brief taste was enough, a moment of joy, but there was too much to do to live in it, and he’d never feel he’d accomplished anything, otherwise. He wanted to remain himself. Not that other Optimus. He didn’t think he could bear it, without it changing him irrevocably, turning him into something harder. He had not the will to resist it, he had not the determination to say to it every waking moment, *no, this is what I make of myself, not you of me!*

Megatron would have, though.

Megatron already knew what it was to be the center of a people. Megatron already knew what it was to be himself in the face of something great and powerful that wanted to change him to suit Its servo. Gods were all very well and good, but they weren’t mecha, and there were some things they *shouldn’t* meddle in. Megatron would have been able to bear the Matrix, and every waking moment tell Primus, *no, this is what we make of the world, not you of it!*

The humans said that saints were the ones who cursed at the gods. Perhaps the same held true for Primes.

He'd said it, many times. Megatron would have made the worthier Prime.

The hideous memory of the desert pushed itself to the fore again. Gasping pain, life, brilliant sun and noise—

Optimus sat bolt upright, looking at the thing on the flat.

The Matrix had done that even without the Allspark.

Sari and her key weren't here...but the Allspark and Matrix were.

*"You ever wonder why the Senate is so slagging terrified of you, kid?"* A memory of Ratchet, looking at him wry and angry over the table. He hadn't been wrong, not entirely, but...

Optimus stared at the corpse.

*"Two things you don't know: one, the Primes of old had this tendency to get resurrected. They'd go offline defending Cybertron, and as often as not, the Allspark would bring 'em back. A few times, the Allspark brought 'em back to receive the Matrix in the first place. Got to the point where you'd leave the Prime's body next to the Allspark to make sure that this time he was really dead. You offlined, gunmetal gray and all of that, and the Allspark resurrected you. Not a proxy, not just that key, but the actual, real, honest-to-Primus Allspark interfered. Unsettling? Yes. Especially if you're on the Senate and hearing about this second bit of news." Ratchet's grin got bigger. "The second bit of news being—exclusive knowledge to the higher-ups, and to yours truly, because there are people there who owe me favors—that the Matrix is acting up."*

"Not because of me," Optimus said aloud to that memory. "Ratchet, you were wrong, it wasn't for me!" He stood, looked for the handles to the flat. "I arrived with Megatron! At the same time!"

Here was hoping it hadn't been too long. If Primus *really* wanted Megatron as a Prime, enough so the Matrix started acting up, a few extra stellar cycles wouldn't matter, right? The Allspark could heal. And revive. Extra time wouldn't matter, right? Right?

The hope hurt, and he wanted to push it away, because what if he was wrong? But he couldn't stop moving. It was the late afternoon, almost nightcycle, and he was due to fuel soon, but this was more important. The Basilica should be deserted at this time, and there were back ways there, ways where no one would stop him and ask questions.

*Give me this one thing*, he thought, vocalizer closing on static. *Just this one thing, please!*

There, there the handle was secured and he could go, and Primus grant Strika wasn't lurking just outside—

The doors slid open and he froze.

"Optimus?" said Alpha Trion, as concerned as he'd ever seen him. "I heard about Megatron. I came as soon as I could." His optics dropped to Optimus, to the antigrav cart, to the Hammer on Optimus's shoulder.

Frag this. He didn't need a lecture about being a fool to reject the Matrix.

"Sorry, I have somewhere I need to be," he said, and pushed past him. Once he was clear, he broke

into a run, towing the anti-grav flat behind him.

“Optimus, what are you doing?”

He didn’t glance over his shoulder at Alpha Trion. “Following a hunch,” he called, and kept going.

People had already gone home, thank Primus. Strika among them. He wondered what had persuaded her to go elsewhere instead of fretting over him, but he couldn’t say he was ungrateful. He checked recent pings, found she’d gone to deal with some minor emergency in another quarter of Iacon and had sent Alpha Trion to check on him.

“I need to talk to you about the Matrix.” Wonderful, Alpha Trion was following him. Presumably, he was taking the ‘check on Optimus’ assignment seriously. Optimus made a face and kept going, the dark bulk of the Basilica—and the service entrance—looming ahead of him. “Its rejection...”

“Yeah, I think I’ve worked it out for myself,” he said, taking the steps to the Basilica two at a time.

“It’s a question of timing,” said Alpha Trion, by the sound of it keeping pace with insulting ease. Optimus wanted to snap at him. He wanted to tell Alpha Trion to slag off, get lost, because if this *didn’t* work, he didn’t want to have to be strong for anyone. The hope was painful, unwanted, because if he was wrong...

The gates shot open in front of him. He pulled the flat with Megatron on it through. “Get the Allspark out of the containment field,” he told Alpha Trion, and pushed the flat to a stop under the Matrix’s pedestal. “Bring it over here, please.”

He glanced up at the Matrix where it rotated in blue silence, and keyed in the code to deactivate its containment field, had to stand on the tips of his stabilizers to reach it.

Metal tapped on stone behind him, Alpha Trion putting the Allspark down. Thank Primus he could obey orders! “Optimus, what are you doing?”

Optimus turned with the Matrix in his servos. “I’m not worthy of the Primacy,” he said. “The Matrix didn’t accept me. But there’s one other who is.”

He knelt next to Megatron’s gray form. Alpha Trion drew in a sharp ventilation. “Optimus, no, you can’t, don’t do it! Megatron must not—”

The Allspark transformed, white-blue light washing all color from the ancient cathedral, casting all of them in shades of gray. Optimus looked down at his servos, ashen like those of someone dead, ashen like Megatron’s, and held out the Matrix.

Megatron’s chestplates shot open. The Matrix vibrated in his servos, yanked him forward. He released it. Was it working? The Matrix wanted Megatron, that much was true—but it had wanted him, too.

Something shot out of the Allspark and into Megatron’s open sparkchamber, too fast for the optic to track, a painful blaze of light. The Matrix clamped down over it, shifting to encompass the sparkchamber, and something within it pulsed.

The Allspark snapped shut, and Optimus reset his optics several times, trying to adjust to the new light levels.

Megatron’s chestplates slid closed, and in the dim light cast by the high stained glass windows, Optimus saw the color wash over his frame, the gray brand brighten to purple, the maroon detailing

rising to the surface, the square shape of his helm shifting like mercury into something Cybertronian, not Terran.

Megatron's optics shot open, red and familiar, and he drew in a long choking vent, one that turned into a violent, undignified coughing fit. Dust and other particulates gusted out of his vents as he doubled over, hacking. Optimus reached up and patted him, mouthing inane comforts, while painful joy surged through him, delight.

He'd done it. He'd brought the Primes back...and he'd brought the *right* Prime back.

Because it *had* worked. It had worked, because the Allspark revived Primes, and the other person on Earth revived by it had been Megatron. Through the key, but he'd still been revived, and Optimus's return hadn't been the only return the Matrix had marked by misbehaving; Megatron's had been as well. He heard himself laughing with delight, glanced up to see Alpha Trion standing there with an expression of absolute shock, most undignified, and it made him laugh harder.

Megatron's frame was still shifting, injuries knitting themselves together. His vocalizer came online with a sputter of static, and he groped for Optimus's shoulder, his pupils widening and contracting as he tried to focus. Optimus caught the reaching servo with both of his own. "I'm here," he said.

"What...are you doing here?" The words were still thickly laced with static. "I thought—"

"Sentinel offlined you," said Optimus. "The Allspark revived you, and the Matrix accepted you. You're Prime, Megatron."

Megatron looked down at his own chestplates and raised a trembling servo to them. "Oh," he said, suddenly quiet. A moment of silence, then he said, "Oh," again, sounding startled. He stared past Optimus, unseeing, and his intake worked.

"Megatron?" said Optimus. Was there something wrong?

"Now that his processor is fully booted, he's receiving the collective knowledge of the Primes, and becoming synchronized with the Matrix," said Alpha Trion. Optimus didn't look away from Megatron, but felt his plating rise in annoyance. How could Alpha Trion sound so...clinical, so cold? Megatron was here. They had a Prime. A good Prime, a Prime better suited to it than Optimus himself ever had been. "It is, I can say from experience, not entirely pleasant."

Megatron's servos clenched on the sides of the antigrav flat, his optics blazing.

"I will give you two time to become reacquainted," said Alpha Trion.

"Wait! I don't know what I should do if something goes wrong—Alpha Trion!"

Alpha Trion turned to look at him. There was something in his expression that made Optimus's spark wince, a disapproval and concern when the older mech's optics focused on Megatron. "If something goes wrong," he said, "there will be nothing you can do, Optimus Magnus, Lord Protector of Cybertron."

Optimus turned back to Megatron, watching the play of expressions across his faceplate. "The Matrix wouldn't accept the wrong spark," he said aloud, more for himself than anyone else. "It *wouldn't*."

Megatron's intake twisted into a snarl, relaxed again.

"Don't you dare offline. I'll drag you back out of the Allspark myself."

Megatron looked at him, managed something like a laugh, then doubled over again.

*Nothing I can do if something goes wrong. Frag that.* Optimus opened his comms. “Ratchet, bring a medical kit to the Basilica. It’s urgent.”

Megatron made a noise like what Sari called a hiccup, except bigger. “This is,” he managed, hiccuped again, and offlined his optics, “*startlingly* unpleasant.”

“Ratchet will be here soon.”

Hiccup. “An exorcist would be more suited to the task, I think.” Megatron grunted. “Shut up, you. What’s the point of being your emissary if I can’t blaspheme creatively?” A pause. “No. No. After millennia of oppression, you do not get to claim superiority because you’re my creator. What kind of creator allows his creations to be treated as we were? No. You *will* answer that, petty god. You will answer that *now*.”

He was picking an argument with Primus. Optimus looked on, impressed and worried, and remembering the Earth joke: “Gods like atheists. It gives them something to aim at.” Megatron was making a damned big target of himself.

The doors at the end of the cathedral opened. Optimus sat up with a vent of relief. “Ratchet, thank you for coming so quickly.” And froze.

They’d been followed.

The shape in the door was all wrong, and horribly familiar. Where was Alpha Trion? Had he not realized they were followed?

The new arrival laughed. “You seem to have mistaken me for someone else, little Autobot.”

He knew that voice. Megatron was too absorbed in whatever internal debate he was having with Primus, but Optimus knew that voice and came to his stabilizers so fast servos creaked in protest. He shrugged the Magnus Hammer off his back and raised it. “Not another step, Megazarak.”

He should have been afraid.

But something in him refused to be frightened. He stood between his Prime and a threat, and there was no other place to be.

Megazarak looked at him, then at Megatron. “And how do you plan to stop me?”

Optimus masked himself and raised the Hammer. “I said, not another step.”

The Hammer felt different in his servos, like an extension of himself. He felt it hum through his servos, felt the power, knew that if he directed power *here* and *here* he could bring the power coursing through Primus’s very circuits up through the ground, knew that if he turned that direction slightly he could draw similar power from the clouds already massing overhead, *felt* the way the Hammer reached into the air, directing every breath of wind in a way it hadn’t on Earth. He held the key to Cybertron’s very environment in his servos, felt it hum with life.

He was a Protector, and he had a Prime who needed to be defended. This was what the Hammer was built for, and it reached out to him with glee and eagerness and the excitement of destruction, begging to be used. His spark reached to it in return.

*This is what I should be*, he thought. *I protect. I will lead if I must...but above all things, I defend!*



Megazarak sneered at him and took another slow, deliberate step.

“Too bad,” he said. “It would have been better if he hadn’t been accepted by the Matrix yet. I could have killed you and taken it to my candidate. But I suppose I can settle for killing you and taking your place.”

Optimus laughed. “If you think he’d obey you, you’re even more delusional than I thought.”

“How little you know him,” said Megazarak. “Everyone can be controlled.”

“Not Megatron,” said Optimus. “Do you hear him? He’s arguing with Primus Himself. You’re small potatoes next to that.”

Megazarak looked puzzled. “Potatoes?”

“My point is,” snarled Optimus, glad of the sharpened dentae, glad of being able to bare them to get his point across, glad of everything, aflame with joy and rage, “you’re not wanted, and whatever you think is going to happen isn’t.”

“Oh, I’m shaking in my stabilizers here.” Megazarak grinned. “I kept Megatron as my lieutenant for two million solar cycles. Don’t think I don’t know him. Don’t think I know how to use him, how to keep him obedient and submissive. Don’t think that standing there with that hammer makes it any different. Baubles aside, what he really respects is strength...and you don’t measure up. Neither did Terminus, did he, Megatron?”

“Megatron’s busy,” said Optimus. “You’ll just have to deal with me.”

Megazarak smiled and drew the weapon on his back, an immense mace. “If you insist.”

Optimus’s optics fixed on the massive spiked head of the weapon. He felt himself swallow hard, the hum of the Magnus Hammer significantly less comforting. *Oh slag. I might still actually lose this. Should learn to keep my intake shut.*

Megatron made a noise of pure rage. “You think that was justified?” he roared. Still talking to Primus.

Optimus took a vent to steady himself, looked up at Megazarak.

*Look,* said a little gleeful voice in him, *there’s so much of him to hit.*

*I am a Protector, and this is my place. Defending my Prime, defending my world, against the evils that would kill it. I will not falter now!*

Later he’d swear it was the Hammer that made him say it, or the hope that Megatron would hear it. “Come on if you think you’re hard enough.”

On the plus side, it made Megazarak look *really* confused in the instant before he brought the mace down. Optimus dodged to the side, wishing for his jetpack, and reached for the power within the Hammer.

It responded, but the force of the blow he needed would take time to build. Optimus focused on holding onto the Hammer and not getting turned into scrap, a not entirely painless process.

Sometime after Megazarak had destroyed the first pillar and had picked him up by one stabilizer and started shaking him vigorously, Optimus happened to look over at Megatron.

Megatron sitting up and looking at both of them, focused on both of them, and casting around for a weapon.

He didn't want Megatron involved. He couldn't let the Prime go into battle with Megazarak, not right off his deathbed. "Megatron, keep out of this!"

Megazarak swung him sideways into a pillar. The world went *crunch* and Optimus's optics whited out with pain. It took him a moment to realize he still held the Hammer, and that the power was still building. *Oh. Good. OUCH, Primus dammit.*

Megatron hadn't found a weapon, and hadn't heard him either, apparently; he was stalking forward, claws out, optics fixed on Megazarak.

"Seriously, I'm fiiii—" Optimus broke off into an involuntary scream as Megazarak wound up and threw him into the wall. The world went white again. The crunch went on longer.

After a moment he realized he was upside-down, partly embedded in the wall, and yes, that was still the Hammer in his servos. From his inverted perspective, he watched Megatron advance on Megazarak.

"Seem familiar?" said Megazarak. "You do seem to acquire Protectors. A pity they don't last very long."

Optimus tried a wiggle, got a stabilizer free, and crashed to the ground face first.

"Remember Terminus? Remember how you begged for his life? Such sweet memories. You may play at being Lord of the Decepticons, you may play at being Prime, but you will always be subordinate to me."

Megatron snarled and launched himself at Megazarak. Megazarak caught him out of the air and dashed him to the ground, put a stabilizer on him to keep him there.

Rage spiked through Optimus's circuits. He surged upright, ignoring the warnings that popped up on his HUD and limped over to Megazarak as fast as he could. Megazarak's full attention was focused on Megatron.

"And now, so soon, you have a new one. So *small*. So *Autobot*. I can't believe you think this can protect you. Tell me, Megatron, what will you do to save *him*?"

Optimus came to a halt, and raised the Hammer. "You're fighting me," he shouted, and Megazarak looked over at him. "Act like it!"

"Oh look, he's still alive," said Megazarak. "I wonder how long I can make this last. Stay there, Megatron, I have use for you yet."

He lifted the stabilizer and turned to Optimus.

Optimus had to be fast. He didn't want Megatron charging into the middle of it and getting himself slagged along with Megazarak. Optimus gathered his thoughts, the crackling power and the joy of destruction, and brought the Magnus Hammer down.

Megazarak didn't have time to scream. The lightning bolt went through him, and his mouth opened, and his optics ruptured and ran down onto his faceplate and he *burned*, and the pile of struts that collapsed onto the floor barely bore any resemblance to a Cybertronian frame.

Optimus raised the Hammer again, reeling. He stank of ozone and overloaded circuits and the energon running down his frame had boiled from its exposure to the Hammer's power. Megatron was *staring* at him, and he was vaguely aware he ought to say something pithy. He thought about it a few moments, swaying. Settled on, "No one addresses my Prime in such terms."

The doors opened again. He turned his helm, something of an effort, saw Ratchet in the doorway, shocked and angry. "What the *frag* happened here?!"

That also called for a pithy statement, but at that point, Optimus lost the battle with gravity, and fell dreamily backwards, still clutching the Hammer.

---

Strika froze in the door behind Ratchet.

She reset her optics.

Oh. It was simply an old officer-class warframe. For a moment, she'd thought she'd seen Megatron.

And then she heard what the officer-class warframe was saying, heard his voice, and stopped again in shock so great it was nearly painful.

"Optimus, Optimus please, you little fragger, no don't you *dare* offline, not now, I'll drag you back myself, *Optimus!*" He turned a stricken faceplate to them, to Ratchet who was already in motion. "Save him, damn you!"

The crack of authority in his voice brought her out of it. She followed Ratchet, obeyed Ratchet's directions numbly, helped them load Optimus onto a medical gurney, and then Megatron on another. When the orderlies offered to take her burden, she snarled at them.

She couldn't tell how they returned to the hospital. She simply found herself in a small recovery room, sitting next to Megatron's berth—where he'd already levered himself upright, regardless of Ratchet's order not to—unable to take her optics off him.

After a long time, she asked, "Is it really you?"

"The night you met Lugnut, you'd dragged me to that bar because you'd become tired of me fretting over Terminus. It didn't work as well as you'd planned—you had to put up with me sharpening my claws on the table all night, and I imagine I was rather poor company in every other respect."

It was a vivid memory, a thick, smoky bar, full of alien fragrances, and the constant *screech screech* of Megatron's claws as he ran them over the table, glaring into his oil as if it had done him personal wrong. Her vocalizer was malfunctioning. Her next words came out thick and strained.

"And when you saw him, what did you say?"

"That you wouldn't have to worry about seriously damaging him. You retorted that strength such as yours had its price."

She stared at him, and he smiled, that wonderful cocky smirk that she'd seen so many times before Terminus died, that was like a flash of a younger mech, burning with idealism and anger and joy in destruction. As if the grievous injuries done him mattered no longer. The smirk that she'd seen so

few times since, and then only a flash when he was trying to seduce someone to their cause.

*It is you.* She onlined her vocalizer to say it, and what came out instead was a keen mixed with static. She tried to suppress it, couldn't. He reached out for her, and she seized his servo, feeling it alive and warm in her palms, and bent over it, the keen only interrupted with hiccups of static. Grief and joy mixed, the grief more acute for the joy, the mech she had so betrayed here and alive, and if this was absolution, why did it pain her more than her guilt had? He was here, he was alive, somehow alive, and that was all that mattered in the world.

She scrambled to master herself, and couldn't, and couldn't care, after a time, not even with Megatron tentatively patting at her turrets and trying to say comforting things, and by the sound of it failing miserably. Primus, Primus, Primus, how could one spark bear this? She'd had victories and defeats and the deaths of dear friends, the death of her dearest spark, the newsparks she'd trained, so many deaths, and this was what undid her? The keen broke into a strange, hiccuping laugh, and she sucked in air through her vents, finally found the sense to offline her vocalizer. But she couldn't stop clutching at his servo.

It was a long while, an embarrassingly long while before she managed to uncurl, stop rocking, actually look at him, and the sight of his faceplate nearly made her laugh again. He looked acutely uncomfortable, horrified at her loss of composure.

"My lord," she said, still thick with static. "I didn't...I couldn't..." Her vocalizer spat static again. She reset it, reached for him. "Come here."

The air squeaked out of his vents with the force of her embrace. But instead of protesting, he pressed his helm against her chest and held her, too.

"Lugnut sends his love," he said very quietly. "You brought us triumph, Cybertron. He'll never stop boasting."

Strika's response was static, a tightening of her arms. After a long time, she managed, "It's good to have you back...my Prime."

## Chapter 75

“First things first,” said Ratchet. “Never do that again. I had to replace half the circuits in your frame.”

“Do what?” slurred Optimus, blinking up at him. “Revive Megatron, use the Magnus Hammer, or get thrown into a wall by Megazarak?”

“Definitely the last one,” said Ratchet. “And the middle one. No comment on Megatron.”

Optimus looked entirely too pleased. Ratchet glared at him. “Megatron already told me what happened, and by the way, just because he’s Prime doesn’t mean that you’re expendable, understand? *I had to replace half your circuits, you stupid fragger.*”

It had been a bit of a shock, walking into the Basilica to find Optimus on the floor, a twisted collection of struts sitting in the middle of a crater, still smoking, the surrounding metal making inappropriately cheery *tink!* noises as it cooled, and Megatron cradling Optimus’s frame and shouting at him that he’d better not fragging die, not after all of this. Fortunately, Ratchet’s indignant devotion to his art was the best in the business, and let him boss someone he knew to be dead through basic first aid and then not-so-basic emergency surgery, so that the person he’d been pretty sure that morning wasn’t dead wouldn’t replace him. Only later, when Optimus was stable, had he turned on Megatron and shouted the full story out of him. Consummate atheist that he was, he was still having difficulty believing it...but so was Megatron, for whom the issue was more immediate.

Optimus looked down at the energon line going into the crook of his arm, then back up at Ratchet.

“I’ll try to break this habit,” he said. “Shouldn’t be too hard. The war’s over.”

Ratchet snorted. *Fat chance. I know you too well, kid.* “I’ll release you in a few megacycles. You really bounced back on this one.”

Optimus pushed himself a bit more upright. “Where’s Megatron?”

Ratchet smiled. “Just outside. I’ll send him in.”

“Thanks.” The brilliance of Optimus’s smile was stunning. Ratchet hadn’t seen him smile like that since...since he’d first bonded with Megatron? No, even then he’d had other concerns as well. Maybe Earth? But his sadness then had been habitual.

He’d never seen Optimus smile like that, he realized, delight untinged by worry or sorrow. Open joy and anticipation and happiness.

He found himself smiling in return, and went out to get Megatron.

---

Optimus let himself back down onto the pillow. He was still exhausted, however much he’d ‘bounced back’. He looked at the Magnus Hammer, sitting innocuously propped up against one of the chairs in the room, and managed a soft little laugh. “Outdid yourself, didn’t you?” he asked, and looked up as the door slid open and Megatron stepped hesitantly in.

He gleamed. The unburnished dark pewter of his frame had been polished to a mirror shine, the black and maroon retouched with high quality paints and sealed with a gloss—a far cry from the utilitarian matte of military class paints. He still carried the Decepticon emblem over his spark, but on his shoulders gleamed a new badge, an unfamiliar one. It took Optimus several moments to place it.

“Solus Prime,” he breathed, after wracking his processor for what he’d learned of the Primes while he was a protoform. Something between the simplification of Prima’s faceplate that the Autobots used, and Megatronus’s the Decepticons followed, hers was a square face with two sets of slanting optics and high, elegant flanges like a crown on her helm. Solus Prime, the Prime of things crafted, things made and remade, broken things restored, injuries knit. The Prime who had perished of another’s jealous rage—Megatronus’s or Prima’s, Decepticon and Autobot mythology differed.

Megatron hesitated a moment, smiled. “It seemed appropriate.”

He came over to Optimus’s berth, looked down at him. Optimus pushed himself up again, and Megatron gathered him up, berth cloths and all, and kissed him. Optimus clutched at him, relishing the feel of warm plating under his servos, the thrum of a warbuild’s systems around him. It felt so good to hold him, to feel as if he could protect him. Optimus buried his faceplate into the cables of Megatron’s throat and clung, venting the smell of him, trembled with the force of his joy, and wanted to keen with it, too.

“My Protector,” Megatron murmured. “My beloved. Lord of the Decepticons. Megazarak’s bane.” He made a sound that sounded suspiciously like the beginning of a stifled keen. “Never frighten me so again, I beg. I thought he’d killed you.”

Optimus managed a weak giggle. “You’re one to talk.”

Megatron’s arms tightened around him, the prickle of claws borderline-painful. “I suppose.”

“We still have problems,” said Optimus. “We got Megazarak, but the other members of the conspiracy, and the Prime-candidate he mentioned...”

“I rise from the dead and all you can do is talk business?”

“Sorry,” said Optimus, still grinning. “I haven’t had much else.”

Megatron’s grip tightened on him, and he realized how very unfunny—and true—that quip had been.

“I’m sorry,” said Megatron.

“No,” he said. “No. Don’t you dare apologize.” He curled himself more firmly around Megatron’s frame. “It’s not like you meant to die!” He looked up at Megatron. “And I managed.”

Megatron snorted. “More than managed,” he said, and took several paces to the window. “You conquered Cybertron. You *rebuilt* Cybertron, even more difficult. The Autobots and Decepticons seem to be living peacefully, something many of my own advisors thought was impossible. Theirs too, if the documents I’ve been reading are any indication. Look, Optimus.”

Optimus looked. The lights of Iacon glittered below them, fewer than before the war, but present nevertheless.

“That is your world,” said Megatron. “They are your people. This is what *you’ve* made.”

“And you are their Prime,” said Optimus.

“Only because you refused the Matrix.”

“I couldn’t take it,” said Optimus. “Every time I have, in every universe...”

“I know,” said Megatron. “But I do not think I could have refused it.”

Optimus snuggled in against him. “I don’t think you should have,” he said, and looked up at him. “In the past, Primes were civilians, Protectors were warframes. Neither had to think from the other’s perspective, and that created a divide. But now, we have a Prime who knows what it’s like being a warframe, and a Protector who knows about the civilians. And uh...”

“You’ve rewritten the laws to make the Prime and Protector positions subject to the Magnus, an elected position.”

“I...thought a traditional title would be needed for the elected position, yes,” said Optimus. “It had already been pretty well divorced from the Protector’s title, thanks to the previous regime. I didn’t want this turning into a theocracy. I mean, you make a wonderful Prime, but what about your successor? My successor? I’m not leaving it up to Primus or the artifacts. The people must choose. It works for the humans.”

“I agree entirely.” Megatron made a face. “Certain gods may not, but will have to deal with it.”

Optimus chuckled. “I hope I haven’t saddled you with too much trouble.”

“We’ll sort it out,” said Megatron, and kissed him.

It was like falling into familiar patterns. Optimus caught Megatron’s helm between his servos and pushed back. He lost himself in it, and he heard Megatron make a little noise of surprise as his glossa pushed into Megatron’s intake.

“You’ve gotten more aggressive,” he remarked when they broke the kiss, and Optimus grinned.

“I had to. You left me in charge of a horde of Decepticons.”

Megatron’s optics slid sideways. “About that...”

Optimus frowned at him. “What?”

“I didn’t leave you in charge of my Decepticons,” said Megatron, sounding somewhat strained. “I left *Strika* in charge of them. I didn’t want to gamble on the good nature of the Phase Sixers. Or put you at risk for assassination—within the ranks, or from...outside interests.”

“She didn’t...”

“She did,” said Megatron.

Optimus closed his optics and tried not to laugh. Maybe he should have been indignant, remembering those first few weeks, the fight with Megazarak, but he couldn’t find it in him. “Of course she did! Does she know you figured it out?”

“Not yet,” said Megatron. “But I look forward to seeing her expression when I ask, ever so politely.”

Optimus giggled into his chestplates.

“You sharpened your dentae,” said Megatron.

“It saved my life,” said Optimus. “And I think I like this better.”

“So do I,” said Megatron, and kissed him again. When they parted, he sat them both down on the bed so he could stroke his free servo over Optimus’s helm. “I am impressed,” he said, and then smiled a little. “Which is something of an understatement. You allied our peoples. And you ended the war, remade Cybertron, all while grieving. All on your own. You took good care of my people, stopped Megazarak, saved Strika’s spark, defied Trepan, and brought peace to our world.” The smile widened. “You’ve even raised the dead.”

He cupped Optimus’s face in a servo. “It’s something no Prime has ever done,” he said. “Not even any of your counterparts. For them, their greatest triumph was my counterpart’s death or defeat, and it destroyed each of them.”

“I know,” said Optimus. “The Matrix showed me. It was why I refused. Even though I knew you were dead, the thought of becoming your enemy again was unbearable. I couldn’t.”

“Yet it longed for you. Alpha Trion expected you to take it.” Megatron looked sidelong at him. “The mech that defeated me on Earth...could he have gone against them?”

“No,” said Optimus, instantly. “He would have seen it as his duty, a burden to bear that had to be his alone—because how could Alpha Trion and Primus Himself be wrong? Even the mech I was before you died would have found it difficult. But after you offlined, I wasn’t in much of a mood to trust Primus with anything.” He drew a vent. “And I couldn’t bear the idea of another war. I couldn’t bear to so much as *look* at my axe for days afterward, either!”

Megatron laughed a little. “Oh. *That* memory.” He rearranged Optimus in his lap and swung his stabilizers up onto the berth. “I’ve been having to do some reading to get caught up,” he said. “Would you like to help? Some points are confusing...did you *really* talk Overlord out of killing Strika without resorting to the kill code?”

Optimus snuggled down in his lap. “Actually...”

---

It was a little odd readjusting to having Megatron around. He hadn’t realized how he’d changed, but he had. Sometimes Megatron tried to comfort him, when there was no need for it, and it annoyed him.

But he was back, and while Ratchet had handed down a strict prohibition on strenuous activity until he okayed it, there was plenty of joy to be found in each other’s company in the meantime, all the kisses and caresses they could manage, and Strika and the other members of the government conceded that the Magnus might be allowed to take some time for his health—and to become reacquainted with his Prime.

They had their own quarters now, within the administrative buildings, where they could be easily found. They were spartan, but past the size and sturdiness of the berth, neither Optimus nor Megatron cared much about that.

They spent those first few days holding each other, reading, recharging, occasionally walking gently about when Ratchet permitted it.



It was hard to talk at first. Unaccountable shyness sometimes swept over Optimus, leaving him unable to do more than smile and stammer at Megatron. From Megatron's occasional hesitance, he supposed it was much the same for him.

Their bond had been indeed been severed by Megatron's death, and renewing it would have to wait until Ratchet was sure that Optimus wouldn't blow out his new circuits in the process.

Which was a loss, but Optimus found it difficult to dwell on with Megatron living and venting just next to him. He was *there*, and that was all that mattered. And Megatron seemed determined to court him properly this time, without the intervention of running a war to distract them. There were energon treats, and flavored midgrade, and if Optimus wasn't quick about it, Megatron would even bring him the morning's reports and fuel in berth, something he'd learned from human courting.

Optimus set about courting him in return with single-minded dedication. Consulting Strika yielded the useful information that Megatron really liked rust sticks, and had spoken longingly about the beauty of crystal gardens in Iacon before the war.

The rust sticks could be made at home. The crystals took longer to procure, as the gardens had been blasted flat to make space for a staging area during the recently concluded war, but discreet inquiries turned up a few mecha who'd saved seed crystals. The hard part was finding anyone who had some they were willing to part with, but he found just enough to comfortably colonize a dish garden, which he seeded under the watchful optics of one such enthusiast. He regretted mentioning it was a courting gift; she refused all payment immediately, and wished him well before launching into a stern lecture on crystal care.

He presented the tiny garden to Megatron that evening, and recited the lecture as best he could. Megatron stared down at it, cupped carefully in his servos, plainly enchanted.

He found out Megatron was writing poetry again entirely by accident. He ran across a datapad Megatron had been working on entirely by accident, and realized it was poetry. He quite liked the first poem, and scrolled down to find the author's name. If Megatron was so fond of their work, he might as well see if he could find other collections.

There was no name, and the last poem's ending line was incomplete. Optimus flushed with embarrassment—he hadn't meant to pry!—and put the datapad down hastily.

The poetry stuck in his processor all day. It hadn't been epics about war, or about love, but daily life. There was one about preparing energon together. One about their cluttered shared office. The way the light fell on the crystal garden. The turbofox and his kits in the rubble just outside their door.

He wondered if that was what Megatron had written before the war, and it made his spark hurt.

He was also worried about Megatron. He acted well enough... but Optimus had seen the state in which the Autobots had left his body, and watched carefully for signs of discomfort or anxiety. None came.

Then Ratchet certified Optimus fit for duty, and "Whatever other activities you care to partake in," the latter with a very significant look indeed.

Optimus still found himself sputtering with indignation at the comment, but Ratchet wasn't abashed in the least.

A megacycle later found them in their quarters, Megatron sitting on the berth with Optimus on top of him. Optimus's frame burned, his spike already knocking against his panel, but kissing Megatron like

this was a pleasure all by itself.

Megatron's hips twitched into his touch, and Optimus paused, fingers rubbing over Megatron's panel. "May I?"

Megatron smiled crookedly at him. "I see you've gotten into the habit of command in all aspects of life," he purred. "By all means."

His panels slid open under Optimus's hand, his spike just as hard as Optimus's felt. Optimus stroked, it, kissed Megatron again, and slid down his frame to kneel on the berth. He examined the spike thoroughly, relishing the way Megatron gasped and twitched under his ministrations, then took the tip of the spike in his intake.

Megatron's helm thunked against the wall and he moaned. Optimus would have grinned if the spike weren't in the way, and fluttered his glossa against Megatron's slit, moved his servo over the base. Megatron's legs moved in the bedding. Optimus stopped moving and put a firm hand on his thigh to still him. He couldn't really see Megatron's face from here, but he frowned at him all the same, mock disapproving. His message must have gotten across, because Megatron drew in a sharp little breath and stopped wriggling.

Optimus hummed his approval, and went back to the business at hand. The girth of Megatron's spike was intensely satisfying, the sounds he made intoxicating.

A servo rested on his helm, then moved away as Megatron's hips jerked. The bedding tightened under his knees, Megatron fisting a servo in it, and Optimus gave his spike a hard suck, pleased with the reaction.

"Optimus..." Megatron was doing his best not to thrust up into his intake, but his hips were twitching rhythmically all the same. "More!"

With his free servo, Optimus reached down and rubbed Megatron's anterior node, dipped into his valve, paying attention to the sensitive walls. Megatron trembled under him, groaning, then drew in a sharp breath and went still, frame bowing in overload.

Optimus still had no intention of swallowing it—it was still too strange—but he wasn't startled by it as he had been the first time. He kept up the touches to Megatron's valve as he rode out his overload, and released his spike, his arousal bordering on painful. He moved the finger in and out, venting hard at the thought of that hot slick tightness all around him.

"Valve or spike?" he asked, when Megatron came back to himself.

"Valve," said Megatron, covering his faceplate with one servo. Lubricant leaked down Optimus's wrist, and the calipers around his finger fluttered. He added another, stretching Megatron, even though he knew it wasn't necessary, and moved in close. One of Megatron's hands settled over his aft, reaching down to his valve. He gasped at the press of a large digit against his anterior node, and pushed back against the finger, trying to get it inside him. Megatron didn't oblige, kept it outside of him, and he frowned up at the larger mech. "You're being distracting."

"I thought you could use a little reward, too," Megatron purred, lifting his knees to give Optimus better access to his valve. Optimus made a face at him, and rubbed the flat of his servo over the glistening folds, the strong tang of lubricant filling the air.

Trying to ignore the finger at his node—if he did, he'd simply collapse against it and be completely selfish—he lined himself up and pushed in.

Megatron drew a deep ventilation, clenching around him. Optimus paused, rocked his hips a little, withdrawing before pushing forward again, giving Megatron time to get used to him. The servo left his aft and clenched on the small of his back. He thrust again, Megatron opening around him, heat and wet and pressure.

He stopped, trembling. He wanted nothing more than to pound into the valve under him, sate his own pleasure, but he wanted this to be good for both of them.

Megatron made the decision for him, bucking up hard into his spike and setting a pace just as hard as Optimus wanted. He vented a laugh, and put a hand on Megatron's shoulder, and gave in to that temptation. Megatron met him halfway, and the berth creaked threateningly.

Optimus couldn't care, lost himself in the visceral pleasure of fragging, Megatron open under him and their gasps and cries mingling. At some point that servo came back, thrusting into him as he withdrew, and the input seemed impossibly strong for how long it took before he overloaded. Megatron went rigid under him in his own overload.

His chestplates were open even before he'd stopped trembling. Megatron looked down at him, his faceplate growing grave as he shifted his own armor aside.

"I love you," said Optimus, reaching up to draw him into a kiss. "I am yours."

"And I, yours," said Megatron. "From now, until the end of all things."

They came together, and Optimus sobbed with relief and joy. The aching, gnawing pain that had been with him since Megatron's death, that he'd thought he'd learned to ignore, vanished.

They were whole.

And they were home.

## Chapter 76

### Chapter Notes

I am so so sorry I was so slow putting this chapter up! I managed to injure my wrist, and it took a while before I could type long enough to finish it! Thank you very much for your patience!

(The 1812 Overture is strongly recommended as music for this chapter...)

“We still have a problem,” said Strika. “The King Rat is still at large, and Megatron is more vulnerable than ever before. They will think that by controlling the Prime they will control us all—myself, Optimus, our government. They have Trepan. Absolute mind control is well within their capabilities. We must be prepared for a kidnapping. And we must use it to our advantage. We may never get another chance to take down the King Rat as easy as this.” She looked across the table at Optimus and Megatron, neither of whom seemed too happy with the suggestion. “I know, I know, I'm ruining your honeymoon, but better me than our enemies. I have a suggestion.”

“Primus only knows how many bad plans that statement has prefaced in my life,” said Megatron. Strika made a face at him.

“I'm doing my job, Lord Prime,” she said.

“Yes, as you usually do,” he said. “Especially when it involves disobeying me.” The statement stung somewhat, but she saw a playful twinkle in his optics all the same.

“Perks of the job, my Lord,” she said instead and look at the data pads out on the desk in front of her. “Now we have a number of very clever suggestions. The one I favor is lying in wait for anyone attempting to kidnap you and kidnapping them ourselves. However it should be noted there is an alternative which certain members of my security staff—specifically Shockwave—seemed to think will have a higher probability of capturing the conspirators, but at greater risk to your person. Therefore this will be your choice, though I am entirely sure that I will regret that before this meeting is over.”

“And what is this alternative?” asked Optimus. He frowned along the length of the conference table at Shockwave, who looked at back at him with his usual patent innocence.

“I propose that Lord Megatron allow himself to be captured,” said Shockwave. Both antennae gradually canted back; he certainly didn't expect a positive reaction.

He wasn't entirely wrong. Optimus's faceplate went very still and considering.

“You're joking,” said Ratchet, half-rising from his seat.

“I told you it wasn't a good plan,” said Strika. “Or at least not one I wanted to recommend.”

“I see what you mean about considerable personal risk,” said Optimus. The stillness had turned into thoughtfulness, and Strika groaned inwardly. He was actually considering it. He and Megatron were far too alike. He turned to look at Megatron.

"You'd have to deal with Trepan again," he said.

"I would be willing," said Megatron. "I think it significantly more likely to succeed than capturing and interrogating any of the King Rat's operatives."

"I agree," said Optimus. "But I don't like the danger that it exposes you to. If we don't find you in time..."

"You have already brought me back from the dead," said Megatron. "Somehow I doubt that mind alteration will pose a significant problem for you."

It was Optimus's turn to give him a profoundly dirty look. "I'm your Protector, I'm not supposed to use you as bait."

"You have so little faith in me, my dear," said Megatron cheerfully. He turned to Strika. "I assume you were planning to use some kind of tracking device for this. Where would you put it so that would not be discovered?"

"Tracking devices plural," said Shockwave. "We would place a number of them in various locations underneath your armor, and in locations not routinely searched. I believe you will want to ask Optimus for assistance with that. Once placed they will be active for several years. I have modified them to emit specific signal if stasis cuffs discharge in their vicinity. Additionally I will give you a signal to activate them in case you are disabled by a means other than stasis cuffs."

"And if I am unconscious at the time of capture? What then?"

"We will be monitoring your signal. Presumably if you're captured your movements will be far enough out of the ordinary to alert us in time."

"That's a bit of a gamble," said Optimus. "I don't like the element of risk involved. Perhaps capturing potential kidnappers is a better plan."

"They'll just come back," Megatron reminded him. "If we don't root them out completely they will remain a problem, maybe not for us but for our successors. Do you want to stake Cybertron's future on the probability that the next Prime or Protector will be able to competently deal with a kidnapping attempt of this nature? Trepan has been around a long time; there is no reason that she wouldn't be for a long time more. No, we must deal with this now, before they have time to become even stronger, or turn anyone in our government into their puppets. They have already attempted to destroy Cybertron once, and nearly succeeded. There's no reason that they shouldn't try again, and if it's unsuccessful, all they have to do is wait. Waiting might even be what they prefer. It would give them time to replace Megazarak."

That made everyone go very quiet. Strika remembered facing Megazarak, and shuddered. The King Rat finding a replacement for him would be a nightmare. She had no desire to find out who might be chosen. At least Overlord was out of the running!

Optimus huffed out a long ventilation. He looked up at her, about as happy as she felt. At last he nodded. "I think you're correct, Megatron," he said. "I don't like it, but I think you're correct."

"Very well," said Strika, unhappily. "We'll get that underway."

When the rest of their business was concluded, and people filed out of the room, she stopped Megatron. "Are you sure about this?"

"The war's not over," he said. "It may look like it is, but our enemy is still fighting. Not accepting

this would be like surrendering. A Prime defends his people. No, we must finish this, and Optimus knows it too.” After a moment he smiled down at her, glanced out the door through which Optimus was visible talking to someone in the corridor, and said, “You chose well.”

The guilt in Strika’s spark lifted. “Thank you,” she said.

---

The main difference between being sparkbonded to someone without the Matrix and someone with the Matrix was that the nightmares got a lot more inventive. They were easier to deal with—neither of them being directly involved in the incidents in question certainly helped distance them—but it was still horribly unpleasant.

That night they jolted awake together, Megatron dislodging Optimus from his back in the process. Optimus scrubbed a servo over his faceplate and groaned. “I think I could have lived happily never knowing that about Zeta Prime,” he said.

Megatron grumbled into the berthcloths, and obligingly held still as Optimus scrambled back up onto his back. “Primes seem incapable of happy endings,” he said.

“Don’t you dare take that to spark.” Optimus arranged himself comfortably, and reached down to stroke the back of Megatron’s helm. Megatron purred, their bond pulsing with contentment. “Though I suppose even without the Matrix’s contributions, we’d have trouble with bad dreams anyway.”

They thought about that a few moments. It was true, neither had had a serious nightmare throughout the duration of the new bond. That was odd in and of itself; what was odder still was that Optimus, at least, had been having at least one serious nightmare a night until the bond solidified.

“Maybe it’s trying to help.” Megatron didn’t seem much pleased by the prospect. “I should have thought it wouldn’t meddle so...”

“Given that it means we get the horrors of history, and I don’t have to watch Sentinel or Megazarak try to kill you repeatedly...”

“Mmm,” said Megatron. “A point.” He reached behind him to pat Optimus, rather awkwardly, and wound up grabbing Optimus’s aft instead. He didn’t seem inclined to let go. Optimus relaxed into the comforting touch and propped his chin on the edge of Megatron’s canopy. “Are you sure about our plan?”

“Yes.”

“Even with Trepan?”

“Yes.”

Optimus frowned. “I still don’t like it,” he said.

“Ah, the Lord High Protector speaks,” said Megatron. “Clearly, I am incapable of defending myself. The moment I received the Matrix, millions of years of tactical experience went right out of my processor, as well as all my weapons systems. I am completely helpless without your aid.”

Optimus smacked the top of his helm, then squeaked as the hand on his aft tightened. “Same as your

sense of humor! Megatron, I'm serious."

Megatron turned his helm and grinned up at him. "I know. But I'm not concerned. Our King Rat needs hunting down. I'm the Prime—and more importantly, the Lord of the Decepticons. I'm not about to shirk the task because you're fretting at me—most unnecessarily, I might add. You'll be watching my back the entire way." He patted Optimus's aft affectionately. "I have every faith in your abilities."

"But..."

"If you're seriously concerned, we can talk it over in the morning. For now, I want my recharge."

"Fine. But I still—"

Megatron offlined his optics and rattled his vents theatrically.

Optimus snorted. "Have it your way, then," he said, and offlined his optics as well.

*There are so many ways this might go wrong*, he thought, servos clenching, but he was tired and Megatron was warm and alive under him, and he dropped swiftly back into recharge.

---

They decided to go along with the plan as intended. There was simply too much to be gained, and the risk, when compared to the accumulated risk of a lifetime of vigilance, was the only reasonable alternative. Things went as planned. Both of them wound up with trackers, just in case someone went after Optimus, and they went back to running the government, stabilizing communications with Caminus, and the thousand other tasks that needed to be done in the meantime.

A few days later, allowing enough time for Caminus's delegation to arrive, Optimus presented the new Prime to his people. It seemed like the entire planet had turned out to celebrate, and he looked at all the screens projecting them across Cybertron, Autobot and Decepticon together, servos clasped, and his spark swelled with pride.

They'd even managed to get Earth fireworks, which weren't very impressive on their own, but after Bumblebee and Bulkhead had spent a few megacycles tinkering with them, they were *very* impressive. Possibly a little *too* impressive.

There were also the traditional Decepticon salutes, and fortunately, Slipstream *did* accurately calculate what distance to hold the *Conqueror* at, so that the volleys of cannonfire didn't blow out every window in Iacon, but still sounded good. Optimus hadn't quite realized what a lot of noise a Decepticon fleet could make firing a salute—thirteen guns fired per ship, one for each Prime, added up over a fleet's worth of ships, even discounting everything smaller than a sloop.

It seemed popular, though. They'd spent so long rebuilding that the luxury of celebration came as a glorious and rare treat, and the crowd was willing to be pleased by anything. Except maybe the Autobot hard-liners, the ones who'd voted for Tyrest in the election, but they weren't much in evidence.

The crowds also cheered when Megatron bent and pressed a chaste kiss to Optimus's dermas, and looped an arm around his waist, hoisting the Star Saber aloft. Optimus did the same with the Magnus Hammer, and both artifacts glowed bright, their energies mingling, and that got an even bigger

cheer.

He'd never in his wildest dreams imagined this. He'd never *conceived* of this. The cheering crowds, the rebuilt Cybertron, *peace*. He'd been brought online knowing he'd fight Decepticons and now...

...they had peace.

He looked up at Megatron, who stared out over the city with distant optics, and reaching over the bond for him, Optimus had a fleeting concept of a different city, long ago, stately and glorious and forbidden. Everything, everyone in its place, in their function, a great glittering place unfriendly and inimical to his very existence. For a moment that city, the city of the Golden Age, overlaid the cheering crowds, and then the crowd came back to the fore. The two of them vented together, and the shabby half-rebuilt skyline with strange alien fireworks over it seemed glorious beyond compare even to the beauty of the past.

That night found them, and the rest of the command team, and the new government officials too, on the roof of the hospital, which was at least flat. The Decepticons taught the Autobots the old line dances, dances that could become combat drills, and the Autobots taught them the old formal pattern-dances, and Optimus's team taught everyone human dances. Before long, everyone had gotten everything a bit muddled up, and was sticking Autobot and human and Decepticon movements together halfhazardly. Optimus heard himself laugh as Megatron picked him up and whirled him around in a gesture universal to all their peoples, and the stars shone above them, and for that moment, the universe was perfect.

---

The perfection broke four megacycles later, when Megatron awoke to the jolt of stasis cuffs and the indignity of being rolled onto a discreet transport cart.

Optimus was nowhere to be seen.



## Chapter 77

The Decepticons getting absolutely star sabered, Strika had expected. The AFF and Autobots, not so much, but Sentinel *had* shut down the pubs, so maybe it was just the excuse to get drunk. The security cameras of the Basilica had caught the entire event, from Megatron's revival to Optimus vanquishing Megazarak, and the whole thing was playing at least every five minutes on every station available.

And a huge quantity of the planet was intoxicated. Someone (probably Swindle) had managed to produce a variety of commemorative things, and people were buying them with the indiscriminate enthusiasm of the happily drunk.

She was counting the megacycles until she got off duty so she could join them. But right now, someone had to run the planet.

And then all the proximity alarms on Optimus and Megatron's quarters went off. Strika stared at the readout for a split second, impressed by the audacity of the fraggers, then leapt into motion. "With me!" she snapped to the rest of the extraction team, including Ratchet, then, into the comms, "Optimus, get out of there now!"

"*Already done,*" he said. "*At the rendezvous.*"

"Good mech." It must have ripped the spark out of him to do that. She hated this too. It helped to remind herself that they were still at war. "We're on our way."

---

Optimus leaned against a wall next to the rest of the extraction team and felt like the worst mate in the history of their species.

He'd done exactly what he'd been directed to do. The intruder alarm had sent a message directly to his commsuite, but not Megatron's. He crept out of berth, taking care not to wake Megatron, and went to rendezvous with the team.

He hated abandoning Megatron, even though they'd agreed that it would lower the risk of a violent confrontation. The presence of Megatron's Protector would jeopardize the plan, resulting in both of them being captured, or a serious fight, which would put all involved in far greater danger. It was logical. It was the only reasonable precaution.

It made him feel like a terrible person.

"How is he?" asked Strika.

"Fine. Mostly angry." Optimus reached across the bond to Megatron's spark, and the *anger/anger/hate/just you wait till the others catch up to me you've made the worst mistake of your functions!* that flowed back over the bond to him would have made him grin under any other circumstances. "He has every confidence in our abilities."

Strika snorted. "Typical." She looked down at her scanner. "They're in the service tunnels."

“Of course they are,” said Ratchet. “Perfect place to be a rat.”

“Get our people to do a scan for high energy signatures in that tunnel. They’ll have to have lights at the very least.”

Strika relayed the order. There was a pause as they crept onward through the darkened streets of Iacon, following Megatron’s transponders.

“Found it,” said Strika. “Two kilometers that way. Unusual energy output. Some electrical, some seem like sparks. And Megatron’s transponders are heading right for it.”

“Let’s get a good scan of it,” said Optimus. “Soon as we know what we’re facing, let’s get ready to listen in. We’ll only attack when we have enough evidence to make an arrest.”

“Understood,” said Strika.

---

The sensation of restraint made disgust rise powerfully in his tanks, and he tried to struggle against the cuffs, to no effect. It only made one of his captors snicker.

He recognized that snicker. Lockdown. Of course. He glared disgust over the mouth clamp.

“Regretting all those threats earlier?” said Lockdown, with a grin that made Megatron wonder how it’d look after a few good punches. “You gave me far more information than you meant to. For one thing, you felt so strongly about Optimus that you were willing to risk losing my services permanently. Moreover, you were *certainly* aware that, having lost the Decepticons as an employer, I would be forced to turn to the Autobots.” The smile became even more unpleasant. “You cared so deeply about Optimus and impressing him that you were willing to risk *that*. That was quite a lot of information, *Megatron Prime*.” The title was a sneer.

Megatron rumbled a growl at him from behind the gag.

Lockdown laughed. “You can’t threaten here, Megatron. I’m getting a very nice sum from Tyrest himself to bring you in.”

*Himself*. Megatron’s processor caught on that word. He’d seen Tyrest around and about, a big mech, a former Justice... not someone you would usually refer to with *himself* attached. Which implied Tyrest was quite high in the King Rat’s organization, if not the Rat himself.

The fact Lockdown was willing to reveal the name meant he wasn’t expecting Megatron to be in a fit state to tell anyone about it. Megatron felt along the bond to Optimus and relaxed into the contact; it was strong. Optimus was close.

The wash of reassurance and protective instinct that carried back to him almost made him laugh. Optimus was taking his role as Protector too seriously. But it meant he was confident, and Megatron hid the satisfaction.

Lockdown and Tyrest would be in for a very ugly surprise.

---

“Everyone in position?” Optimus asked. He felt distracted; the bulk of his attention was on the bond. Megatron was well aware of the difficulty of his position, but not actively alarmed. In fact, he seemed to have taken Optimus’s attempt at reassurance as something amusing, which made Optimus frown and think uncharitable thoughts about his mate.

Who responded with the soundless equivalent of a snicker.

“Jazz is getting the recorder into position,” said Strika. Jazz, propped up against a wall and intent on a datapad showing the feed from the camera and microphone he was maneuvering along the wires, spared a servo to give a brief thumbs up, then went back to work without a word. It had been Ratchet’s idea, inspired by Earth medical tools used to explore the human gastrointestinal tract. Optimus had carefully stopped listening as Ratchet got a bit too gleeful about explaining the thing’s origins.

“Good,” said Optimus, and started watching the feed as well. There wasn’t much, just a long dim space with heavy-duty electrical wiring running through it, one of the energy conduits that supplied this sector of Iacon. Even the maintenance hatch for this was smaller than the palm of Optimus’s servo laid flat; the authorized technicians had frames that would have allowed them to access the wires in question.

Optimus huffed a sigh. The new enlightened future would apparently require quite a lot of change to the basic infrastructure of Cybertron on top of everything else.

“And *gotchya*,” said Jazz with satisfaction. “Looks like they’re not even bothering to disguise faceplates. Let’s see, who have we got here...” He trailed off. Strika peered over his shoulder and let out a short bark of laughter.

“Can’t imagine we didn’t see that coming,” she said.

Optimus looked too, and felt like an idiot. “Well,” he said, “I suppose there’s something to be said for hiding in plain sight. Let’s hope he really is Ratchet’s King Rat.”

“The King Rat is fairly short-staffed, these days,” said Strika. “Besides, I doubt he would be able to resist the temptation to brainwash Megatron personally.”

---

They removed the mouthclasp once they had him strapped to the table, which was fairly satisfying. Megatron recognized the mech standing by the table, and felt foolish for not identifying him as a threat earlier. Optimus overlooking him, he understood. Optimus had probably never seen him before; Optimus had never lived under the old Senate.

“Tyrest,” he said, with a sneer. “A pleasure to meet you in your true calling at last.”

Tyrest frowned. “I have no tolerance for humor when it comes to a threat of your nature, Megatron.”

“Honored, I’m sure. What do you mean by this? I’m sure we can settle this reasonably before anyone is....hurt.” He smirked.

“You are a faulty mechanism. You are here to be repaired.”

Megatron's lip curled. "And what do you mean by that?"

"You have taken a position far higher than your processor is designed to handle."

"Primus might disagree with that," said Megatron, keeping his voice mild. "Given that it was His decision."

Tyrest waved a servo. "Nevertheless, we will aid him. You require modifications before you may act as Prime."

"And what of my Protector?"

"He is properly obedient. It will take a long while before he notices anything amiss. Longer still if you keep him properly cowed."

Megatron tamped the rage down. "Did you by chance modify Sentinel as well to suit his position?"

"Of course. We kept him focused on the danger of Optimus Prime. His longstanding obsession made it particularly easy. It kept him from being faintsparked about the decisions we required him to make."

"And Ultra Magnus?"

Tyrest smiled. "My finest product," he said. "Until Shockwave removed him, he kept order with impressive competence."

"Before or after the war?" asked Megatron, though he didn't need to. He remembered Ultra Magnus as he had been, and with a sinking feeling, recalled the sudden change that had come over him at the end of the war, the broken promises.

"After, of course."

"And what of Megazarak?"

"He needed no modifications."

Megatron's smile this time was grim indeed. "Of course he didn't. Tell me, Tyrest, to whom to you answer? For whose greater good do you work?"

"That of Cybertron."

"Is it you alone who decides what that is?"

Tyrest's optics narrowed.

Megatron stared back, all innocent inquiry.

"I carry out the wishes of the Senate," he said.

"Which one?" said Megatron. "The one that was just overthrown, or the one that was overthrown millions of years ago?"

"The one that was murdered millions of years ago. By you."

"With you the sole survivor."

“Yes. You neglected to check the corpses you left.”

“I see. So you alone now determine the future of Cybertron, over the wishes of Primus Himself. And more notably, of the people.”

“Primus works through me!”

“He does not.” The words left his vocalizer before he was aware of forming them, and Megatron wondered with alarm if it had been him or the Matrix who had spoken. If it was the latter, he certainly didn’t appreciate it.

Tyrest backhanded him across the faceplate. “You’re a warbuild. You wouldn’t understand what Primus wanted if he shouted!”

There was nothing to say to that. Nothing he needed to say to that, with the hum of the Matrix in his chest.

Tyrest stared down at him a few seconds.

“You wouldn’t understand,” he said again, and with something like revolting pity, Megatron realized he was reassuring himself. He wanted to hate Tyrest, but Tyrest was trapped in his own mind, the god he so slavishly followed merely the echoes of his own thoughts and fears. He thought he made great sacrifices for his god, that his faith was a difficult thing indeed to bear, a thing that must by necessity define every moment of his being, that the sins he committed in the name of his god were virtues. Worst yet, worst for the monster he had turned himself into in the name of that god, was that it was the god he wanted. The only god he could want.

He would always believe in something so cruel, something that demanded every waking moment and filled it either with vicious guilt or self-righteous triumph.

He would never hear Primus. He never had. He believed it was all he wanted. It wasn’t. And so he’d spent his life in listening, while making himself unable to hear.

The Matrix pitied him greatly.

Megatron did not.

Megatron had been taught all his function that Tyrest’s idea of Primus was true, and in disgust turned away from it. He’d chosen his conscience over a god, no matter how powerful and active that god was. He despised anyone so weak as to submit themselves to a deity they acknowledged to be evil, seeing it merely as a way to curry favor in this life or the next. Even if his conscience could have stood it, his pride could not. And in Tyrest, he saw something still worse.

It was not a terrible thing to live without a god, he told the Matrix, but it was a terrible thing to live with a god so foul, real or imagined. Tyrest had been so pleased in his special role as that god’s emissary that he had never thought the questions the evils he performed.

And he had enforced that god upon others.

Smiling, sure in his faith.

Megatron might carry the Matrix in his chest, but he had no faith. He dealt with Primus as he had with any other ally. He would not make himself subservient to a god, because there lay unquestioning obedience, the path Tyrest had trodden. If that was a faith, it was a very alien thing from surrendering control. It was not a focus on god, but on the sufferings of a people, on the

necessity of justice, and that was a harder master indeed. He did not find comfort in his god's presence. Only another challenge to be met.

The fact that said god found this amusing and somewhat endearing was something that he elected to ignore.

"He's plainly irredeemable," said Tyrest. "Trepan, do your work. The sooner we end this travesty of a 'Free Cybertron', the better."

"What makes you think I will cooperate?" asked Megatron quietly.

Tyrest snorted. "What makes you think you'll have a choice?"

"I can wipe my drives," said Megatron. He had no intention of doing so, even without the sudden spike in Optimus's alarm over the bond, but said it for veracity's sake. "You think that I would put my people at risk without some method at my disposal to resist Tyrest's expertise?"

"I've heard it's a very ugly way to die," said Tyrest.

"So is slavery."

Shadows shifted in the corner, and Trepan came forward into the light.

She was tall, Megatron's height at least, but slender, and with her datacables curled away looked much like any other bot, save for the profusion of lenses attached to her helm so they could be rotated down over her optics. She was mostly warm colors, golds and oranges, with tasteful touches of black here and there, and she was smiling.

"You didn't have the bearings to do that last time," she said, and with audible clicks, four of her datacables unspooled, moving with a life of their own, wicked toothed clamps opening and closing lazily. "Don't fight it. I'd hate to damage you further."

Sick, visceral disgust pressed Megatron's shoulders back against the table. It felt as if his very paint were trying to get away from her.

*Optimus*, he thought, trying to wrench his gaze away from the advancing monster, *now would be an ideal time to intervene...*

## Chapter 78

Megatron's thoughts went sharp and alarmed. "Now, let's go," said Optimus, as he heard over the bond, made clear with the force of Megatron's emotion, *Optimus, now would be an ideal time to intervene!*

Followed, a scant vent later by, ...*if, that is, my Protector finds it convenient.*

His Protector, crawling through an access hatch, rolled his optics and moved faster.

The emotions from Megatron abruptly shifted to true fear and crawling revulsion. Optimus sucked in a startled vent and threw himself down the last few meters, landing at the end of the access hatch with an undignified crash. He picked himself up off his aft and bolted for the end of the corridor.

Someone made a surprised noise. Optimus took them in the midsection, knocking them off their pedes, stomped hard between the legs, and kept going. The end of the tunnel was light, movement, the rumble of Megatron's voice. Optimus took the Magnus Hammer in both hands and reached for the power around him. It came, leaping in sparks and bolts to the head of the Hammer, the hot itch of electricity putting his plating on edge and filling his intake with a metallic tang. "You are under arrest," he roared through the crackling maelstrom. "I strongly advise you not resist."

People's optics went very wide, particularly that of the femme bending over Megatron, cables extended, all but touching his helm. Trepan.

"Stand down," she said. "Or I'll fry your precious Prime's processor."

Optimus blasted her instead.

Not enough to kill her, but it took her off her stabilizers and slammed her into a wall. He came to a halt with electricity still arcing to the head of the Hammer, and looked around. "Any other volunteers?"

Trepan groaned.

There were more of them than he'd expected, but the hot rush of power filled his circuits, the giddy knowledge that this was what he was made to do. He was to protect his Prime. Protect all of Cybertron, every Cybertronian life, and in this moment he could make no wrong step. If these people were foolish enough not to obey, that was their choice. All he had to do was stop them, and he had the power of Cybertron itself at his disposal.

And the sight of Megatron strapped to that table had made him very, very angry.

Ratchet and the others skidded to a halt behind him, and the first of Megatron's captors tried a guilty slink to the exit. Optimus sent a bolt of electricity into the floor at his stabilizers. "That will not be tolerated. Servos up where I can see them. Allow yourselves to be cuffed. Trust me that I can fry you, and not the mecha cuffing you, before you try anything."

They all looked at Tyrest. Optimus sighed inwardly. Of course. Tyrest had been hiding in plain sight. An unassuming retired justice, playing at being a moderate voice—but he was old enough to remember the start of the war, still have the connections to do something like this. Optimus only remembered the orange faceplate and prominent chin from the background of his trial, one that had nevertheless been strongly supportive of his dismissal. He'd put his personal feelings aside during the election; he wanted there to be no obvious personal enmity during those proceedings.

So much for that. He'd given Tyrest a chance, and Tyrest had taken advantage of it, attacked Megatron. He'd have no compunction about what might need to be done.

Tyrest must have seen the determination in Optimus's optics, that he could not play on an expectation of Optimus's gentleness. He bared his dentae in an almost Decepticon snarl. He was about to say something defiant, Optimus could tell, so he blasted him as well.

"You kidnapped my Prime," he said. "You threatened to alter his mind without his consent. Those are only the crimes I know you're guilty of, not the ones I *suspect* you of. It would be something of an understatement to say that I am deeply unamused and very angry. I have no patience for your misbehavior."

The various people around them raised their servos. There was no more resistance as they were cuffed, though Tyrest started shouting once the effects of the electric bolt wore off. Ratchet reached up and put a mouth clamp on him.

Optimus went to free Megatron, who smiled at him. He looked calm enough, but over the bond Optimus could tell he was badly shaken. "Very efficient, my Protector," he said aloud.

"They threatened you," said Optimus flatly, doing away with the last of the restraints. Megatron sat up fast and dragged him into a passionate kiss, hard and biting.

Tyrest's muffled shouting increased considerably.

*Megatron we have things to do!* Optimus sent. The kiss was nice, but—

*This is important,* said Megatron. *A demonstration. The world Tyrest fought for is dead. I'm driving the point home.*

Optimus listened to the muffled noises of rage, and took Megatron by the sides of the helm to kiss him better.

---

There was a trial, which was far more than Tyrest and Trepan had allowed Sentinel. Megatron's testimony made it quite clear that they had indeed detained the correct mecha, and that Tyrest was the true 'King Rat'. Ratchet made bad jokes about that.

Optimus kept his servos out of it as well as he could. He knew all too well that his desire to push for Tyrest's indefinite spark confinement instead of execution was not from mercy, but a desire for revenge.

That desire unnerved him, for all its cold implacability. It wasn't just personal. It was flat outrage for what Tyrest had done, for how one mech's selfish self-aggrandizement had led their species into this mess. It was anger on Megatron's behalf, and Terminus's and Lugnut's and Smokescreen's and even on Sentinel's. Optimus knew now for a fact that the friend he had known in the Academy and the mech he'd fought were not the same person, and that even though the change had partly been Sentinel's own action, no small part had been due to Tyrest's orders. Though he knew it was unlikely, he wanted to blame it all on Tyrest. It made everything that had happened easier to live with.

And Tyrest had fully intended to do the same to Megatron. Optimus didn't dare see or speak to any



of the defendants in person. He was very afraid of what he might do. He thought he knew himself well enough that he might have been able to trust himself around them, but the memory of what had overcome him while rescuing Megatron, that absolute certainty that he was right, that he could do no wrong still terrified him. Sometimes, he wondered how akin it was to what his alternate had been feeling when he put his axe through Megatron's helpless helm.

He did not know what he was capable of. And until he did, he did not wish to put himself in the way of temptation.

Megatron laughed a bit when he said this, quite grimly, and curled around him. "Whatever you're capable of, it is perfectly justified," he said. "What he did to us, he did to thousands, perhaps millions of other Cybertronians, and he intended still worse."

"I know," said Optimus. "But I don't want to be the mech it might make me into."

Megatron kissed the top of his helm. "I don't think you would," he said at last. "You're better than that." The kisses trailed downward. "Did I tell you how glorious you were, coming to my rescue?"

"Many times. And you're changing the subject."

"Yes. There are many nicer ones." A broad warm servo cupped his array, and he shivered in delight. "Ones that have the bonus of being heavily disapproved of by our enemy." Megatron nibbled, and Optimus arched with a gasp. "Fraternizing being forbidden and all that."

Tyrest's incredulous rage had been satisfying indeed. Optimus pressed back into Megatron's embrace with a small moan.

Megatron slid out from behind him to lean over him, arranging him on the berth. "You have saved me from my worst nightmares twice over, Optimus Magnus," he said, and there was no hint of amusement or mockery in his optics. "From Megazarak. From Trepan. You have saved yourself from your own fears and demons. All save one."

Optimus looked up at him, confused. Megatron cupped his faceplate in a massive servo, and leaned in, dropped a kiss on his nasal guard. "Yourself," he said, when he drew away. "You fear yourself. Your power. That killing rage, that certainty, that drive to protect. I know it. Every warframe knows it. Every one of us has to come to terms with it. Some let themselves be ridden by it, let it make them its servant. Others know how to keep it leashed and at their command. Do not fear it, Optimus. It will control you if you do not learn it for what it is, if you try to pretend it does not exist. Face it as you've faced every other monster, without fear, without flinching. *Know* it. Learn how to ride it."

Optimus didn't want to think about it. He wanted Megatron to get back to kissing him. Or better things. Not...whatever this was. But Megatron looked down at him, concerned, utterly serious, and he forced himself to listen to what his bonded was saying, really listen. Even though it unsettled him.

"You are so used to being powerless," said Megatron, as if he was speaking to himself. "You are so used to it that the idea of being powerful terrifies you beyond measure. It frightened me, long ago. But you do not have to fear it forever. It does not lessen you; it is just another weapon, even if you must share your processor with it. It is one more weapon. You aren't afraid of the Hammer. Do not be afraid of this."

"I'll try," said Optimus after a long pause. "I just...Where do I *start*?"

"That is different for everyone," said Megatron. "But do not fear it." He bent and kissed Optimus again. "For now, shall I take your mind off it?"

“Please,” said Optimus, and Megatron’s chuckle gusted hot air over him.

---

“So...”

Strika looked up at one of the neverending stream of Caminan dignitaries sitting on the other side of her desk. “Yes?”

“You know the Prime, right? What’s he like?”

“He’s a bullheaded scraplet,” said Strika. “No sense of self-preservation.”

At the other’s horrified gasp, her optics narrowed in amusement. “I’ve known him most of my function,” she said more gently. “I know more about him as a friend than his Primeliness. Primus couldn’t have picked better, but a word of advice? Don’t be reverent at him. It spooks him badly.”

The Caminan nodded hastily.

Strika looked at him, and very carefully didn’t laugh. “You’re taking this rather better than the last three who asked me that. Including the Mistress of the Flame.”

His optics went very wide as he imagined that. “Uh. A good thing we’re still allies, then?”

Strika did laugh. Good. This one she could work with. “You could say that. She wanted to know a good deal about Megatron. I obliged by being brutally honest.”

“Oh, Solus,” he said.

“I know they’re your beliefs,” she said. “But better they run up against me before they encounter Megatron, because otherwise we *will* have a *very stupid* conflict on our servos. He’s not particularly diplomatic. Now, about your posting here...would you be amenable to joining Ambassador Windblade’s team?”

He nodded vigorously. “Yes. Yes of course.”

“It will entail long periods here on Cybertron. Will you be able to manage that? Do you have a Conjunx who might need accommodation?”

“No. It won’t be an issue. I’m...” he looked down, embarrassed. “I’m rather looking forward to living here, if I can.”

*Ah, thought Strika. Atheist or discontent.* There were rather a lot of them in the delegation. Another reason to take him on. She needed people who understood Caminus but wouldn’t jump down her throat for, say, picking the Prime up by a stabilizer and bashing him into the floor during morning practice. Or bawling him out. Or referring to him as a bullheaded scraplet. “Well, you will be. Report to Shockwave for housing assignments, and Windblade as your supervisor. If she isn’t in her office, try Slipstream’s.”

He nodded, thanked her profusely, and left. Strika settled back, pleased with herself. And wondering when the Slipstream and Windblade issue would explode. The Caminans were bound to notice eventually, and she wasn’t so sure whether goodwill between Cybertron and Caminus would translate to a relationship between their ambassador and a Cybertronian air commander. The Mistress

of the Flame was, as far as Strika could tell, a bit of a control freak and would have to be handled carefully. Preferably by Megatron, if Megatron could be trusted with handling anything carefully.

The answer to that question was probably no.

She sighed and fanned her plating open and shut, and rested her chin on the desk. She was very irritated at the problems peace brought with it, but at the same time glad to have them. She wondered how Lugnut would fare in this new world they were building. He'd probably have had great fun teaching the newly protoformed bots how to fight. He'd probably have them crawling all over him and pretending to be beaten easily to encourage them. Or he'd be helping with reconstruction. He had always enjoyed fitting things together. Give him a set of precut parts and a picture of the finished project, and he'd be happy for megacycles.

At least the fraggers responsible for his death, however indirectly, were going to pay. The ones directly responsible already had.

She missed him. It didn't hurt quite as much anymore, but she still missed him horribly. He'd been such a stable, unassuming part of her function until he wasn't there anymore, and not a day would pass when she didn't wish she hadn't refused a few more missions to spend time with him. That she didn't wish she had followed them to Earth. That she hadn't disobeyed Megatron and attacked the damn spacebridge.

Of course, they might not have won the war if she'd done any of those things, and she shouldn't wish for anything that undermined that, but she still did, because it was Lugnut, and she missed him.

Dear Ratchet, as good a friend as he was, as well-meaning as he was, as obviously fond of her as he was, would never even come close in her spark. They were close and their relationship something she treasured, but there would never be anything like Lugnut again in her function, and she didn't think she particularly *wanted* something like that again. It might feel like a betrayal.

But this new Cybertron would have made him very happy indeed. That tinged her sadness with a sort of pride.

*We won, my love, she thought. We won. The world you died for is here. It wasn't in vain. None of it was in vain.*

## Chapter 79

The trials grew tiresome after a time.

Megatron huffed a long ventilation and somehow kept the gratitude off his faceplate as his chronometer pinged him about an important meeting with Optimus and Professor Sumdac. He nodded to the presiding judge and crept from the courtroom, the femme's voice trailing after him. "On the charge of unethical medical experimentation, with intent to compromise the mind, this court finds you guilty. On the charges of the violation of prisoner of war rights, this court finds you guilty on all two thousand six hundred and fifty seven counts. On the charge of deliberate and artificial impairment of the cognitive function of a protoform under your care, this court finds you guilty..."

Given that the mech in question was Perceptor, it would probably take all day to read out the charges. Again. Megatron shook his helm. To think that he had once focused on conquering Cybertron and destroying the Autobots, when they suffered under the same oppressors. His hatred had blinded him.

He wondered sourly how much of that last thought was him, and how much was the Matrix.

He'd been attending what trials he could to make sure they were properly conducted. He felt it was owed to the hundreds of thousands of dead Cybertronians, Decepticons and Autobots alike. But affairs of state prevailed, and he was glad of the interruptions.

Optimus's brilliant smile when he entered the Magnus's office warmed his spark, and when he leaned down over the desk to kiss his mate soundly, it was only *mostly* to annoy Professor Sumdac.

Who didn't look nearly as annoyed as he should have. The expression on the little fleshy face was one of fond amusement, which sat ill indeed with Megatron. The Matrix laughed at that.

The meeting dragged on, and then there was another with Strika, who wanted help with the Caminans.

"All I'm telling you is to be prepared," she said. "And *polite*. They think you're the next thing to Primus. Actually, that you're overlapping with him. So behave yourself. No spouting off about how you're equal to them."

"But Primus thinks so." It was true, but he was really motivated by sheer contrariness. She threw a stylus at him for that.

"Don't be difficult," she said. "The Mistress of the Flame is still annoyed that her favorite acolyte is courting a mere officer, and a clone at that. It will have to be handled very carefully. Lots of emphasis on Slipstream's worthiness and your trust in her. It'll mean more coming from you."

"They still have class distinctions?" Megatron didn't hide his disapproval.

"More like a desire to keep their culture distinct from ours. Cooperation is good, but they don't like the idea of one of their dignitaries 'facing one of us. At least not yet. We'll work on that. *I* at least approve of Windblade, and I want the two of them to be happy."

"You can't mother the entire planet."

Strika made a face at the organic term. "Watch me. Now, about the shipyard repairs..."

They discussed that for far longer than it warranted, then Megatron rose to head off to the next appointment. “Will you have time for a fight once you get off duty?” he asked.

Her optics tilted in a grin. “Always, my Prime.”

“Don’t call me that.”

“I couldn’t obey you all the time,” she said. “Your ego would suffer. Old friend.”

“Old friend is perfectly acceptable.”

She gave him a fond look. “Good. Then I look forward to denting you impressively this evening, old friend.”

She would have made a wonderful Prime if offered the opportunity. So would Optimus. So would Ratchet. The thought paused him in the corridor, looking at the skyline of Iacon, slowly becoming whole again. There were thousands of mecha as worthy as he. Perhaps that was what had scared Tyrest and his cronies so badly.

The thought made him smile as he headed back to the courtroom.

---

Ratchet grumbled and nestled back against Strika. Cybertron’s winter season—only slightly more bitterly cold than its summers—was almost upon them, and they’d left the ventilation shutters open so they could listen to the storm coming in over Iacon. The downside of this was the chill.

“How long do we have until Bumblebee complains?” murmured Strika.

“Some time. At least these things are pretty well insulated from each other.” Ratchet pulled more of the thermal insulator over himself and tucked his helm under it for good measure. He could still hear the storm’s warning rumbles, feel the building electrical charge. A gust of wind carried the scorched scent of ozone; the rain promised by the forecasters earlier that afternoon was indeed materializing. Ratchet’s warm cave vanished as Strika reached over to dial the ventilation shutters further closed, so there was no chance the acid rain would find its way inside. The windows were already locked tight.

“None of our colonies had real electrical storms,” said Strika. “No acid rain, either.”

A roar of thunder rattled the windows in their frames.

“It’s hard to believe we’re finally home,” she said.

Ratchet reached for one of the enormous servos encircling him and held it.

“I made the right decision,” he said aloud. “Contacting you.”

She chuckled. “That’s something of an understatement.”

The rattle and hiss of rain began, the scent of ozone sharp and clear. They listened to it, listened to it trickle from the wax-painted walls into the shielded gutters, a growing rush of liquid.

“At least it didn’t rain acid on that planet,” said Ratchet, and smiled a little.

“No, or both of us would be very dead.”

They fell silent.

“You scared the spark out of me,” said Ratchet at last, as memory resurfaced.

Heh, resurfaced. Appropriate enough given the circumstances.

*It rained. It rained amazingly. It rained enough that if he stayed where he was much longer, he'd be swept off his stabilizers, into the torrent of ugly churning water, in which rocks and trees occasionally bobbed to the surface. He was pretty sure that would kill him, Cybertronian or no, so he scrambled up the muddy embankment, ignoring the grit getting into his mechanisms. There was a cave up there, dry, a ledge he hooked a servo around and heaved himself in, collapsing in an exhausted, grateful heap with the tips of his stabilizers still in the seething rain.*

*He didn't look around much. He tried standing, and bashed his helm on the ceiling. He sat down instead, and huffed.*

*The next breath filled his sensors with the stink of fresh energon. His tanks lurched, and he looked around quickly. There, a drag mark on the floor, bright pink smudged. A brighter glow further back.*

*Oh frag. He said it aloud, and in the silence afterward he heard something move, metal on dirt, and red optics onlined in the depths of the cave.*

*“Oh frag,” and it was very close to a prayer, strangled and terrified.*

*Headlights blinded him. “You are a medic?” said a femme's voice.*

*“Yes,” said Ratchet, backing away. “I'll just be going, I'll leave you the cave—”*

*“No,” said the voice. “You will fix her.”*

*Ratchet lowered the arm he'd thrown up to shield himself, and squinted.*

*Huddled against the dark bulk of the femme, there was another shape, smeared with energon.*

*“Fix her,” said the femme. “Or die.”*

*“I don't need threats to do my job,” snapped Ratchet, needled beyond terror. “Turn those off. I can't see a damn thing. I'll use mine.”*

*Hesitation.*

*Then the lights clicked off.*

*Ratchet let out a long vent, turned his on, and inched forward, looking at his patients. Because it was patients plural. The femme's threats—the big femme, he corrected himself—were mostly hollow. Her primary turrets had been wrenched from their sockets, and they leaked sluggishly down onto her shoulders. Her crest was also badly damaged, and he could see the glow of circuitry through a series of blaster-holes in her abdomen. She had to be in incredible pain, but her entire focus was on the little Seeker crumpled at her side.*

*The little Seeker whose plating was already gray. It looked as if someone had punched through her plating and ripped the first organ to come to hand out—apparently, her fuel tank. She'd been dead, but not nearly long enough to have had a merciful death.*

*"There's nothing I can do," he said. "She's gone."*

*The femme snarled, optics flaring.*

*"You can kill me all you like," and oh he hoped not, he was shaking harder than he'd ever been in his life, but he dredged up the acidic wit because the alternative was terrified whimpering, "but it won't do anything about that. Here. Come on, lift that arm. Lift it now, I need to get at that wound."*

*She stared at him, then slowly complied. Ratchet went to work, amazed he wasn't offline yet, narrating everything he did and working as slowly as he dared.*

*"I can't do anything for your turrets save patch them," he said at last. But the femme was staring at the corpse of her companion.*

*"She was under my protection," she said, very quietly, then shifted as much as she could in the confined space to move the frame aside. "You repaired me. Why?"*

*"I'm a medic," said Ratchet. "Can I share this damp miserable burrow for the night, or is this the part where you kill me?"*

*She chuckled, a grim little sound. "Treat the damp miserable burrow as if it were your own, Autobot," she said. "Primus knows it soon enough will be."*

*Ratchet's turn to chuckle; Megazarak's defense of this mudball had been sorely lacking.*

*"One condition. I'll take you hostage if your people show up before mine."*

*"Hopefully the rainstorm will have let up by then. But fair enough." He paused, decided that he'd had enough chances to get dead that night that he couldn't pass up another, and asked, "Why do you follow Megazarak, anyway?"*

*She stared at him. It wasn't the sort of question you asked an enemy while holed up in a cave, that was certain.*

*"I don't," she said after a long time. "I follow Megatron."*

*It was the first time he'd ever heard that name. In retrospect, he should have thought more of it. Instead, he fell silent.*

*The storm lightened up before dawn. Strika rose immediately, shuffled forward on servos and knees past him, paused in the doorway. "If you ever wish to defect, Autobot, use that frequency," she said, and was gone.*

Until the night Optimus had returned, misery radiating from him like engine-heat, Ratchet had never taken her up on it.

Well. Other than that one time on Hedonia. When Megatron overthrew Megazarak, and appointed his new generals, he'd had a moment of horrified realization, because *frag*, he could have stopped one of Megatron's top generals before she'd even gotten started!

On that night on Hedonia it had seemed like a good idea to show off his bearings. He'd drunk-dial one of Megatron's top generals, have something to boast about, but fortunately he hadn't had this magnificent idea until he was in private, which had been a narrow escape indeed.

"Her name was Aileron," said Strika, pulling him back to the present. "We ran into Magnus. She

thought he'd be easy to take down because he was unarmed."

Ratchet hissed in horror and sympathy.

"He went as battle-mad as Megatron," she said. "Or used to. Have you ever seen him fight without the Hammer?"

"No," said Ratchet. "Never."

"Consider yourself lucky."

A flash of lightning sent bars of light skittering over them.

Strika's vents grew slow with recharge, and soon started to rattle amazingly. Ratchet smiled, and watched the storm. He wasn't sure when he actually fell asleep, but when he did he was safe and warm and happy, and it was very strange that this was now normal.

---

Tyrest was sentenced to indefinite spark confinement. It had several advantages. It looked better than execution, but would keep him out from underfoot for the foreseeable future. And although suspension in a state of nothingness sounded horrifying on paper, he'd be in the equivalent of stasis the whole time as well.

Megatron didn't like the idea. Megatron felt that an honorable death was far preferable. Optimus privately agreed with him, but Tyrest richly deserved it.

He did, however, feel guilty enough about it to acquiesce to Tyrest's request for an audience, something he immediately regretted, as it consisted of Tyrest hurling abuse at him from the cell. Hurling abuse in a calm, reasonable tone, which was somehow worse. Optimus stood there with his arms folded, watching the allotted time tick by on the wall chronometer.

It was the change in Tyrest's tone that caught his attention. He reset his optics.

"Do you know where you came from?" Tyrest repeated, with a very nasty smile.

Optimus gave him a skeptical look. "You've called me seven kinds of traitor and made several fairly impolite allegations about my interfacing habits. I doubt that whatever information you might provide would be accurate."

Tyrest sneered at him. "A failed experiment. You and Sentinel were our prototypes. A better warframe. Obedient. Loyal. Designed to protect Autobots, not to take pleasure in mindless violence. Most of all, to serve your proper masters willingly. Not—not *this*." He gestured at Optimus, at the Magnus Hammer. "You and Sentinel should have been perfect, if you hadn't become corrupted by that revolting organic world! One was supposed to serve—you showed you were clearly inferior from the start, when your idiotic lack of judgement killed Cadet Elita One! But that planet gave you delusions of equality!" His faceplate twisted in ugly rage. "You were more defective than we ever *dreamed*. You were meant to serve, built to serve, and while Sentinel performed perfectly you—you defied us, you defected, you played shareware to *Megatron*."



Optimus bared his dentae at him, hiding his deep unease at the idea. “And you can’t understand why that would be, can you? Because other beings aren’t sentient to you, they’re toys to be moved around as you please, abused as you please, and you’re startled when the abuse becomes too much and they rebel. It shouldn’t be a mystery why I left, Tyrest. Not to anyone who deserves leadership. ”

Tyrest pinched his nasal guard. “Typical organic sentiments. You should have obeyed. Putting concern about your own wellbeing over your function is an organic weakness; you are Cybertronian. Your function is all that should matter, your *world* should take precedence over anything else.”

“That might be the Cybertron you want, Tyrest, but not what the Cybertronian people want. They’ve spoken. You can’t ignore them any longer.”

“Lie to yourself all you like,” said Tyrest. “You can never overcome your coding. If you could, the Matrix would have accepted you.”

Optimus paused, then turned around. “It did,” he said quietly. “I rejected it. Goodbye, Tyrest. I hope you find redemption.”

---

He wasn’t sure if he really meant that. Tyrest’s words about Sentinel disturbed him deeply, and his memories of the horrors Tyrest had wrought were too fresh. But he’d said it anyway, almost out of habit. Because it was right, even if he was uncertain about whether he *really* meant it. He knew his alternates would have. He had no idea if Megatron would. He suspected so.

*Meant to serve, built to serve.* He shuddered at that. Didn’t Tyrest have optics? He’d *seen* what Sentinel leading had done! Perhaps he was responsible for most of it. Not a question Optimus wanted answered. Sentinel was dead, Tyrest was imprisoned. It was time to look forward, no matter how much he wanted to dwell on the wrongs of the past.

As if actually moving forward were as easy as thinking that. He huffed an exasperated vent, and went to his next appointment. Alpha Trion.

Maybe Alpha Trion would be able to make sense of Tyrest’s words.

He shouldn’t allow them such a hold over him.

He offlined his optics briefly. He didn’t want to look back at the past. Not seriously. But what if it was important?

He’d keep worrying about it until he asked, he knew.

And felt stupid for it.

Alpha Trion kept him distracted with plans for rebuilding the Archives most of the morning. At last he looked up at Optimus, who was busying himself with one of the plans, and said, “Is something troubling you, Magnus?”

“It’s nothing,” said Optimus quickly.

Alpha Trion gave him a look that was very much like the ones Professor Sumdac gave Sari. “You are becoming too much of a politician, Optimus.”

“Something that Tyrest said,” said Optimus, feeling inexplicably guilty.

Alpha Trion made a small *go on* gesture.

“About my onlining. That I was an experiment.”

Alpha Trion drew in a long ventilation. “I see,” he said.

Optimus said nothing. Alpha Trion looked at him, evaluating.

“Perhaps,” said Alpha Trion, “I have something to confess to you, Optimus.”

Optimus tensed. *Oh frag. Tyrest was right?*

“You have seen what the other versions of the Autobot-Decepticon war were like,” said Alpha Trion. “Does it not seem remarkable to you that ours was nothing like them, that the devastation we faced was far milder, that we came to peace so easily?”

Optimus almost snorted. *Easily! He was here for the plague! He calls that easy?* But those faint ghost-memories troubled him, a Cybertron utterly dead. Cybertron splintering. He sobered immediately.

“Every other war, you and Megatron have been allies at the beginning. Lovers, even.”

Optimus nodded, stiffly. “Yes. I’m aware of that.”

“I saw our war beginning here,” said Alpha Trion. “After so many iterations, I had no desire to see our world torn by it as other realities had been, and so I interfered. I saw the stirrings of Megatron’s rebellion, and knew it was too late to stop him. But there was one other factor I could control.” He met Optimus’s optics. “You, Sentinel, Jazz, Elita One, the other modern Primes. You were indeed experimental, new officer-class warframes to keep the increasingly restive military in line. You were built civilian-small, to encourage the protective instinct, but given weapons and battle protocols so that you could protect yourselves and earn the respect of the true warframes in battle. They focused on charisma, strong moral beliefs, and courage, having observed a tendency of the standard warframes to admire such traits.”

Optimus thought privately that their definition of ‘charisma’, let alone ‘strong moral center’ must have gone badly astray indeed in Sentinel.

“They programmed you to be strictly loyal, for obvious reasons. You could be terribly dangerous if you came out from under their control.” Alpha Trion looked down, very briefly. “I knew it was too late to stop Megatron. But you and the others... there was still time. I persuaded the Council that the situation was too volatile to risk their expensive new technology. So it was poor foolish Pacificus Prime who befriended and betrayed Megatron, not Optimus Prime, and in the confusion I made it appear that you and the other new warframes were stolen by Decepticons. I wanted no risk that you would emerge into the middle of a war. No risk that you and Megatron would begin the disastrous spiral that had played out in so many other realities.

“Pacificus died on the floor of the Senate with his masters, and with Ultra Magnus leading us, I hoped that Megatron’s war would never become as vicious as it had when he was fighting his friend. Ultra Magnus’s response to Megatron would not be tempered with mercy or regret as yours so often was, and he didn’t have your regard for the sanctity of life.

“As I had hoped, our war ended quickly—brutal, but short, and Cybertron still lived at the end of it. I thought I had won against fate, against the tendencies of sentient beings to make the same mistakes

over and over again. You were online after the end of the war, given a protoform, and I was relieved. When you were dismissed from the Academy for Elita One's death, I was still more relieved. The more you did that was unlike your alternates, the less likely it was that the events that devastated them would play out here." His intake quirked. "But you and Megatron have a way of finding each other."

Optimus sat, stunned and sickened. He was supposed to have stopped Megatron's rebellion, and Alpha Trion had interfered.

He wasn't sure if he ought to be angry or relieved. He thought about the lives the other Primes had led, the splintering crunch of Megatron's helm under his axe, the shattered corpse falling to Earth, Jazz torn in half by Megatron's servos, the faint ghosts of horror the Matrix had shown him, and for the spark of him could not find the anger.

"I see," he said aloud.

But what about those who had died from the monstrous behavior of the Autobots, the Autobots with no leader to check their cruelties? This was as close as one could get to *knowing* that one could have made a true difference, stopped the horrors if only things had happened another way. Alpha Trion with his choice had saved Cybertron, but allowed the Autobots to sacrifice the spark of their cause to convenience and rage.

He looked at Alpha Trion, and did not know if he would have made the same decision. There was simply no good choice. Cybertron dead, or the horrors of Sentinel's regime.

"Thank you for telling me," was what he finally managed.

Alpha Trion smiled, serene again, and rose. "Doubtless you have things to attend to, Optimus Magnus."

"One question," said Optimus. "What of my programming?"

"Everything can be overcome. You simply found a different idea of Cybertron to be loyal to. Sentinel...did not."

Sentinel had been programmed to be a monster. Optimus's tank curled in on itself. "So he never had much of a choice."

Alpha Trion paused in the doorway to look back at him. "Only as much of a choice you did," he said. "Or Elita."

"Elita never had a good choice," said Optimus quietly. "Not with what I did. Not with what Cybertron was."

Alpha Trion smiled again. "Cybertron itself never had a good choice until this war. Until you gave it one. Perhaps you might do the same for your friend."

*But she's dead*, Optimus almost said, and then he saw the way Alpha Trion was looking at him.

"How do you know she survived?"

"Because being a cryptic old mech has its privileges," Alpha Trion said, and was gone, leaving Optimus alone with his shock.

A ghost of fear flicked through him. He had been built to gain respect and protection from

warframes. Had Megatron had much of a choice falling in love with him?

But Megatron had known Elita—Blackarachnia. Megatron had known Sentinel. Jazz. They all shared the same design and programming. If there were truly no choice about it...

Still, he reached for Megatron, transmitted the data over his private comms, and sat trembling as he awaited the response.

Affection and amusement reflected up the bond.

*We both have been programmed to love many mecha, said Megatron. I, warframes like myself. You, your fellow Primes. Does that render what I had with Terminus moot, nonconsensual? I think not. There were many others who fell into that category that I might have loved, but I loved him, and him alone. So it is with us now. Our frames, our programming, are not of our choice. Why feel guilty for them? If your creators had created mecha who would inspire blind hero worship in all warframes, so blind as to render consent impossible, why did I not fall in love with Jazz as well? Or perhaps Blackarachnia, when she was under my command? She was as bold as you, possessed of many of the same admirable qualities. But I did not. That is because I am not the sum of my programming, and you are not, either.*

There was a pause. Then a set of glyphs, a picture of a line written by the unpracticed servo of a warbuild.

*We are not only our programming, or our frames, or our abilities. We are our sparks, and our sparks dictate what truly matters.*

The opening to *Towards Peace*, Optimus realized, a memory, and as true now as it had been six million years ago. They had all been programmed and made to serve a function. But that did not mean they were helplessly bound to that function. That did not mean programming and frames dictated every interaction.

He did not like the idea he had been specially built. But there was no good answer to that, no magical way to change the past, to be absolutely certain his creation had not allowed him some unfair advantage in Megatron's feelings. Megatron was not troubled by it. Optimus was, but he and Megatron would do the best they could together, despite their programming, despite the machinations of a deeply unjust society, which had assured that no two mecha could truly be equals.

It was no perfect world.

It would not be perfect for a long time, but until then, they all needed to live in it.

After a time he looked up at his desk and the piles of reports and work orders and budgets, and smiled a bit. He didn't know where Elita might be, but he knew that even if he did, going after her would only drive her further away.

What better way to manage this imperfect world than to create a better world for her to return to. For her. For everyone else lost among the stars.

He reached for the first of the work orders, and started reading.

# Epilogue

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

It was a very long time before she found her way off of the little backwater world the blast had carried her to.

It was even longer before the rumors of what had happened on Cybertron reached her. Still longer before Black Arachnia decided to trust them, and see for herself.

She'd never seen Iacon like this. It was full of life, in a way that it had never been even when she was a cadet. Air traffic was heavy, generally unmonitored. No military checkpoints. Sitting in a landing queue, she used the ship's sensors to do a close visual scan of the streets.

Autobots and Decepticons both went about their business. She didn't see Elite Guard, and the screens above the city were mostly deactivated or showing news—including what appeared to be a satirical piece making fun of the Prime and Magnus. She watched them for some time, but there was no propaganda, no *Join the Elite Guard Today!* recruitment advertisements.

Even more shocking was the shipment of energon on the docks, under a minimal guard. She stared at it. Did they have so much energon that people didn't bother stealing it?

She shook her helm and followed the docking instructions to her assigned space, then sat back and sighed.

Better now than never. Autobots and Decepticons seemed chummy enough. Still no telling what they'd do to a technoorganic. She straightened her shoulders and went to the hatch, waiting for the hydraulics to let down the ramp.

*Vent*, she told herself. *Vent. You can take anything they throw at you.*

The ramp hissed down, and she stopped in her tracks, optics wide. She couldn't take anything they threw at her, she realized, a servo going to the Decepticon badge at her throat. She couldn't, and the hurt and anger and loneliness washed over her again in a wave, because there at the bottom of the ramp, servos behind his back, a hopeful expression in his optics, stood Optimus. Her optics went to his shoulders, the Autobot badge on one, the Decepticon brand on the other...and the third, unfamiliar, in the center of his chest, the simplified version of Solus Prime's helm. The Magnus Hammer sat propped against a cargo cart, looking somehow insignificant next to its bearer.

Optimus moved a servo. She tensed, but he merely lifted it in a small wave. "Hi," he said.

She reset her optics at him. He looked like an idiot, was her first thought. The Magnus of all Cybertron, standing at the ramp of her ship, with a nervous hopeful expression, a nervous hopeful smile, making an Earth gesture, and speaking a distinctly Earth greeting.

"I uh," he said, "I wanted to welcome you home. I left Megatron with an unpleasant meeting at the last moment, because I only got the alert when you came in, or otherwise I would have warned you." He straightened his shoulders, while she still stood amazed in the hatch. The gesture spoke of a habit of confidence, for all the careful deference of his face, the rest of his frame, and it seemed very odd indeed on Optimus. "Anyway. Welcome to Cybertron, Blackarachnia. Were you planning on staying anywhere? If not, the Primal quarters are simply overflowing with spare rooms." He smiled, showing a hint of fang for all the kindness of the smile. It was rather fetching on him. "We'd be

delighted to have you.” He paused a moment. “Or ought I to say Elita One? I’m not sure which you would prefer. Either way, you are very welcome.”

*He’s still a dork, she thought, the human term more appropriate than anything else. Optimus became the fragging Magnus, is running the planet, and is still an utter dork.*

After a moment, she took a step down the ramp, then another, and another, and she was standing chestplates to chestplates with him, and looking up at him. There were scars she didn’t remember, and something about his optics was utterly different. He might sound like him, but this was not the Optimus she’d saved on Earth.

She wondered if this was someone she might be able to respect.

“I don’t know,” she said at last. “Blackarachnia will do.” *For now*, some small traitorous part of her processor thought. Blackarachnia was a name she’d earned, tried to claim her monstrous nature with, but it had been born more from self-hatred than any true pride. But at the same time, she wasn’t Elita anymore. She wasn’t sure she could ever be Elita again. Too much had happened.

He smiled again, offered a servo. “That’s all right. May I show you around? Or would you prefer privacy?”

She looked away. Long habit dictated privacy, but her spark ached at the prospect. Optimus offered acceptance. Optimus Prime the Autobot was a mech she could never trust again...but Optimus Magnus wasn’t an Autobot. He was something in between, older and kinder and filled with a bright vicious defiance she’d only seen in Decepticons.

She hesitated, looking at him, examining him. No, he was different. And something in the way he looked back at her made her wonder if this Optimus might, just might, understand.

Understanding. Acceptance. She’d told herself she didn’t need them. She *didn’t* need them. But if they were offered...it was too much of a temptation.

She took his servo.

Maybe a new name might be in order. Just maybe.

She had always liked Ariel.

## Chapter End Notes

Holy crap.

I can't believe it's over.

For a little background, this fic came about when I was finishing up *The Quality of Mercy* and ran across a fan-made version of *The Hanging Tree*, from *The Hunger Games*. It froze me mid-sentence, as a wonderful, horrible plot idea flowed into my brain. The result is what you've just finished reading, which just goes to show that you should be wary of the results of watching *TFA* and *Catching Fire* in the same week...

On a more serious note, this fic has carried me through an intensely strange and difficult year. Because of this, I am particularly grateful that you, the readers, have enjoyed and

supported the fic to the frankly astonishing degree that you have! It is something close to my heart that I am intensely fond of, and I am enchanted that you have enjoyed it as well. When I started writing I had no idea how special this fic would be to me, its characters, its creation, and its readers alike. Thank you for everything.

(And, because I can't resist ruining the moment, I will now start dedicatedly updating my new fic, an Age of Extinction rewrite--so if you want more robot tragedy, head on over there, where I intend to serve it by the pitchfork.)

Best to all of you, and thank you for your time!

Works inspired by this one: [Can't Touch This](#) by [Rennet \(SilverScrap\)](#)

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!